

**CAN WE BE WRONG
ABOUT ANYTHING
AND GO TO HEAVEN?**

*Fellowship and Unity
In
Churches of Christ*

B. D. LEWIS

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⇐ **INTRODUCTION** ⇒

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⇐ INTRODUCTION ⇒

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While this book may help readers with backgrounds similar to mine to find their way out of the labyrinth of legalism into which they were born, others may find it useful in better understanding how the Holy Spirit works within the believer to accomplish God's purpose.

For some, it may offer insight into the vast difference between human love and the divine love of God poured into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit. That love is the object of spiritual fellowship and the substance of spiritual growth, as the scriptures describe both fellowship and growth of the body of Christ in terms of divine love.

In this book, I will share an understanding of scripture that has led me to conclude that

1. Righteous conduct must always be motivated by divine love—otherwise, it is not righteous (1 Corinthians 13).

2. Divine love must be received from God (1 John 4:7)—otherwise, it is not truly *his* love.

3. God's love is received when his Spirit is received (Romans 5:5).

4. God's Spirit is his nature (2 Corinthians 2:10–11).

5. God's nature is love (1 John 4:16).

This is another way of saying that

1. All righteous behavior is prompted by the divine love of God, poured into the heart of the believer by the Spirit whom God has given us.

Consequently,

2. To "walk after" or "live according to" the Spirit, to be "led" or "governed" by the Spirit, or to be "spiritually minded," means to act as prompted by the "love of the Spirit" whose nature is that of God.

From this, it follows that to share the divine nature is to share the divine love.

As you read this book, you will surely find things you don't agree with. So, I encourage you not to reject *everything* I have to say just because you don't agree with *something* I have to say. Each idea should be considered on its own merit, even though in my mind they are all connected.

There will be some repetition in what I've written, partly because I am not a professional or particularly disciplined writer. But often, the repetition is intentional: (1) to challenge the longstanding use of words that have acquired meanings inconsistent with biblical usage, or (2) to highlight the biblical significance of outdated ecclesiastical terms.

Finally, when discussing familiar scriptures in a new light, it sometimes takes repeated exposure before we begin to see them with fresh eyes. So, I encourage you to stay with me until the end—just in case what I have to share turns out to be as helpful to you as it was to me when I first discovered it.

Throughout this book, I have consistently used masculine

third-person pronouns—*he, him, his*—to indicate gender inclusivity. This is not due to a lack of appreciation for the fact that, in Christ, "there is neither male nor female." Rather it reflects the long-standing convention in English, as well as in biblical Greek and Hebrew, where words of masculine gender are used to include both genders—like "fathers," which can refer to both parents, and "man" which can refer to humankind.

English has no standard way of expressing gender inclusivity in the third-person singular without using the masculine form, aside from awkward alternatives like "his or her" or "his/her." Some modern translations of the Bible attempt to solve this by using plural pronouns in singular contexts—such as "*Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it*" (NIV 2011). This is a break from the long-standing norms of English grammar.

Despite recent linguistic campaigns to retool *they, them, and theirs* as singular pronouns, I have chosen to quote from translations that resist imposing a contrived, non-standard egalitarianism on a language that, like many others, lacks any natural solution.

Except where otherwise indicated, all quotations from scripture are taken from the *New International Version* (1987).

⇐ FELLOWSHIP ⇒

AND DOCTRINE

IN CHURCHES OF CHRIST

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[Overview of Organization and Practice](#)

Since the subtitle of this book references the beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ, it may be helpful to explain who these churches are, my relationship to them, and how I can credibly and accurately discuss their beliefs and practices.

It may also be useful to define the terms *fellowship* and *withdrawing fellowship* as they are used by Churches of Christ, since their meaning may not be familiar to all readers, particularly those from other Christian traditions.

Churches of Christ generally object to being called a "denomination" because of their roots in the Stone-Campbell unity movement, which began in the early nineteenth century with the independent efforts of Barton W. Stone and of Thomas and Alexander Campbell.

Most members of Churches of Christ view the Stone-

Campbell Movement, also known as the Restoration Movement, as an effort to end denominationalism by calling upon all Christians to lay aside their distinctive interpretations of scripture and follow the simple pattern of Christianity found in the New Testament. However, they are generally unaware of other Christian unity efforts based on similar appeals. They also tend to overlook the possibility that alternative interpretations of scripture—on which their perceived pattern of faith and practice is based—could be correct.

Churches of Christ consist of autonomous, independent congregations with no overarching ecclesiastical structure. In fact, they generally avoid referring to themselves as "Churches of Christ," preferring instead "churches of Christ" with a lowercase "c" to emphasize their belief that they are not a denomination but simply local congregations of believers, like those described in the New Testament scriptures.

Church Government

Churches of Christ practice a leadership structure of ruling elders, assisted by deacons who handle non-teaching responsibilities at the elders' request. They typically employ a preacher, who may refer to himself as an *evangelist*, though his role often consists mainly of delivering sermons rather than engaging in active evangelism. In practice, he functions as a *pastor* by teaching and caring for the congregation.

However, Churches of Christ avoid calling their preachers "pastors" to distinguish themselves from denominations that apply the term to a single individual who may not meet the biblical qualifications. Instead, they emphasize that *pastor*, *elder*, and *bishop* are interchangeable terms in scripture, and are always spoken of as serving in a plurality.

Terms of Membership

Churches of Christ generally believe that all who have truly "obeyed the gospel"—their preferred phrase for becoming a Christian—have already been "added to the church" by God and do not need to *join* it. Consequently, the phrase "join the church" is never heard among traditional insiders.

After conversion, new believers are automatically considered members of the local congregation where they were baptized, provided they have no plans to attend elsewhere. If they choose to associate with a different congregation, they typically indicate their desire to "place membership" by going forward at the end of a service at that congregation and making their desire known. Such a request is automatically accepted unless the applicant comes to them under extenuating circumstances. While the phrase "place membership" does not appear in scripture, it is thought to be supported by biblical precedent.

Conversion

Churches of Christ consider a person to be a Christian only if he has confessed his faith in Jesus Christ (usually before the congregation or other witnesses), repented of past sins (merely assumed to have occurred), and been immersed in water (almost always immediately following his public profession of faith) *with the understanding that the design of baptism is specifically "for the remission of sins."*

In other words, the candidate for baptism must believe that baptism is the specific point at which he becomes a child of God, is saved, and is forgiven of past sins. Without this understanding, a person's baptism is generally regarded as invalid, and the recipient is not considered a true Christian—regardless of how genuine his faith in Christ may be or how

evident his godly character.

Since there is no way to determine exactly what a baptismal candidate understands about the purpose of baptism, it is simply *assumed* that anyone baptized in a Church of Christ setting had the correct understanding—or, at least, the one administering the baptism did so—and is therefore accepted into the fellowship as a member in good standing. Those who were immersed in churches other than Churches of Christ are subjected to an interrogation as to the purpose for which they were baptized and, typically, are required to be re-immersed "for the remission of sins." They are then received as members, regardless of their true, unspoken views of the design of baptism.

Perseverance and Security

Churches of Christ hold what might be called a semi-Arminian perspective in that they reject Calvinism and believe in free will and the possibility of apostasy. However, to the extent that they accept legalism, deny the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and deny that God overlooks sins of ignorance, they are neither Calvinist nor Arminian.

Churches of Christ generally understand baptism to provide forgiveness *only* for sins committed prior to baptism. Post-baptismal sins are thought to be covered by what is often referred to as "the second law of pardon"—a phrase clearly not found in scripture but used to describe how forgiveness is obtained for sins committed after baptism.

In recent years, there has been increasing diversity of thought within Churches of Christ regarding the grace of God and post-baptismal sins. However, under the "second law of pardon," that shaped my early faith, a believer was required to recognize and repent of his sin, then ask God for forgiveness—based on 1 John 1:9:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If sin is of a public nature and has brought reproach upon the church, the believer is expected to confess it before the assembled congregation, after which the church prays for God's forgiveness on behalf of the penitent member.

Since the early twentieth century, Churches of Christ have not generally addressed the question of how God regards unrecognized sin. Upon the sudden death of a member, it has not been uncommon to hear someone express the hope that the deceased had the opportunity to recognize and confess his sins and pray for forgiveness before dying. This was based on the belief that failing to do so could result in eternal condemnation.

A believer's standing before God at any given moment was thought to depend on John's conditional statement:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Since light was understood to be the opposite of darkness—interpreted as sin—committing a sin meant stepping out of the light, thereby severing fellowship with God and risking eternal loss.

John had just written:

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

Thus, a believer was thought to move in and out of fellowship with God for periods of time that varied in length, depending on his recognition, repentance, and confession of sin, and prayer for forgiveness.

The same reasoning applied to those believed to be in doctrinal error as judged by the leaders of the congregation, whether mainline or otherwise. Holding interpretations of scripture that the leaders considered erroneous was seen as walking in darkness and thus being out of fellowship with God. The question of whose interpretation was to be regarded as correct, and who had the authority to make that determination, is central to this book and will be explored below.

Members of Churches of Christ firmly believe in the possibility of apostasy and most often appeal to passages from the book of Hebrews—chapter 6 in particular—where the impossibility of being restored to repentance is mentioned.¹ The warning that a hardened heart can make repentance impossible is frequently quoted to instill fear in undisciplined or backsliding members and to urge them to take seriously their spiritual condition.

Far more frequently, however, the scriptures assure the salvation of believers who, though not immune to sin, are not given to willful rebellion (2 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 7:25; Hebrews 10:14; 1 Peter 1:3–5).

Liturgy

The liturgy of Churches of Christ—commonly referred to as the "worship service"—consists of *singing* hymns—more recently, contemporary choruses led only by male members and unaccompanied by musical instruments—with a growing number of exceptions—*praying*—led exclusively by men, with some exceptions—celebrating the *Lord's Supper*—typically using grape juice, distributed by male members only—collecting a voluntary monetary *offering*—though regarded as obligatory for all income-earning members—and a *sermon*, usually delivered by a paid preacher, minister, or evangelist.

One significant group within Churches of Christ has historically opposed a paid ministry in favor of what is considered to be a more scriptural system of mutual ministry.²

Traditionally, though not required, a hymn is sung following the sermon to allow responses in the form of requests for baptism or prayers for forgiveness of public wrongdoing or for spiritual restoration. The service usually concludes with announcements, followed by a final prayer which officially marks the end of the assembly—after which women are freed from limitations placed on them during the assembly.

Uniformity of Doctrine

Although Churches of Christ have no centralized organization or official doctrinal statements, a remarkable degree of uniformity exists among their congregations. A person may attend Churches of Christ in different parts of the world and find a remarkable similarity.

Without any formal unifying structure, one might wonder how these autonomous congregations maintain such consistency in polity, liturgy, and theology.

One explanation for their uniformity is found in the thesis of *The Mirror of a Movement* by William S. Banowsky, former president of Pepperdine University and the University of Oklahoma.³

Banowsky argues that speeches delivered over decades at the annual Abilene Christian College Lectureship, from 1918 through 1965, reflect the collective thinking of Churches of Christ. The selection process for these speakers ensured that they represented the most highly regarded and most widely respected voices within the movement, effectively shaping and reinforcing the beliefs of its members worldwide. While

Banowsky's thesis seems plausible and well-argued, another significant factor contributing to this uniformity is the influence of widely circulated Church of Christ periodicals.

Throughout the history of the movement, editors of these journals—subscribed to and circulated among the general membership, especially among preachers—have played a crucial role in shaping beliefs and practices. They have done so by (1) controlling which topics receive attention and how they are discussed, (2) limiting responses from opposing views, and (3) using editorial influence to question the "soundness" of those who challenge their interpretations of so-called "non-negotiable" doctrines. Such censorship limits the income and sphere of influence of those deemed questionable.

Overview of Fellowship and Unity

One of the central concerns of this book is the question of how Churches of Christ determine which beliefs define "soundness" and who qualifies for church fellowship.

Members of Churches of Christ are heirs of the religious tradition begun by Barton Stone and the Campbells, who launched it as a unity movement in which Christians from all denominations were called upon to receive one another without regard to doctrinal differences.

Soon after the death of the leaders of the Stone-Campbell restoration movement, one of the foundational principles of the restoration—that doctrinal interpretations were never to be regarded as a condition to Christian fellowship and unity—began to be disregarded. In fact, this change may have been encouraged by David Lipscomb himself in raising questions as to the extent to which Alexander Campbell understood the principles he advocated.⁴ While there were those who warned that to regard doctrinal deductions as tests of Christian fellowship was contrary to the principles of restoration, upon

which the movement was founded, their views soon came to represent a diminishing minority of readers of the *Gospel Advocate* in particular.

Daniel Sommer: A plan for division

It was Daniel Sommer who, in his 1889 Sand Creek (Illinois) *Address and Declaration*, urged churches within the Stone-Campbell tradition to reject as brethren all those who refused to abandon certain practices—such as the one-man, imported preacher-pastor system—after being given sufficient time to adopt what he considered to be the correct understanding of scripture. Regarding those unwilling or unable to change their understanding, he declared, *we can not and will not regard them as brethren.*

The historical tradition of present-day Churches of Christ began with the publication of Sommer's *Address*. Although they claim a direct lineage with those who were "added to the church" as they were being saved on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2, their views on separation over doctrine and fellowship do not predate Daniel Sommer.

Thomas Campbell: A plan for unity

In his 1809 *Declaration and Address*—often called the Magna Carta of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Thomas Campbell appealed for unity on a different basis—one that Sommer seemingly did not share and one of which many in modern-day Churches of Christ are unaware.

First, when speaking of unity among brethren, Campbell refers to "all that mutually acknowledge each other as Christians, upon the manifest evidence of their faith, holiness, and charity." He explains elsewhere that:

"A manifest attachment to our Lord Jesus Christ in faith, holiness, and charity, was the original criterion of Christian character, the distinguishing badge of our holy profession, the foundation and cement of Christian unity."

Secondly, Campbell identifies the source of almost all disunity as:

... the imposing of our private opinions upon each other as articles of faith or duty, introducing them into the public profession and practice of the Church, and acting upon them as if they were the express law of Christ, by judging and rejecting our brethren that differ from us in those things, or at least by so retaining them in our public profession and practice that our brethren cannot join with us, or we with them, without becoming actually partakers in those things which they or we cannot in conscience approve, and which the word of God nowhere expressly enjoins upon us.

In other words, we should not force our doctrinal deductions on each other as if they were required by Christ. When we make them tests of fellowship, we create division. When such deductions are imposed, the only option for visible unity for those who find imposed deductions to be erroneous is to remain silent and go along with interpretations they can't honestly accept as being God's will.

Campbell points out that *"there is a manifest distinction between an express Scripture declaration, and the conclusion or inference which may be deduced from it."* He emphasizes that the former can be clearly understood, even when the latter is only imperfectly, if at all, perceived.

Consequently, he concluded that, "in order to entitle them to a place in the Church," individuals should not be required "to make a profession more extensive than their knowledge."

He insisted that

. . . although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so.

In other words, human deductions based on statements of scripture *are to be held as private interpretations or opinions regarding what God meant by what he said. However, they are not to be imposed upon others or used as a test of fellowship. Simply put, "inferential truths . . . ought not to be made terms of Christian communion."*

Consequently, Campbell continues:

"We dare not, therefore, patronize the rejection of God's dear children, because they may not be able to see alike in matters of human inference," for "no man can relinquish his opinions or practices till once convinced that they are wrong; and this he may not be immediately, even supposing they were so."

Finally, Campbell observes:

But that all the members should have the same identical views of all Divinely revealed truths, or that there should be no difference of opinion among them, appears to us morally impossible, all things considered.

By "opinion," Campbell means doctrinal interpretation.

Although subsequent leaders in the movement expanded the requirements for receiving a person into the fellowship of the church, Campbell's vision of unity allowed all believers to maintain the visible oneness of Christ's body without compromising their intellectual integrity or abandoning one of

the core principles of the Protestant Reformation—the freedom of the individual to interpret scripture according to conscience.⁵

This same sentiment was echoed more than half a century later by David Lipscomb, editor of *The Gospel Advocate*, in the April 22, 1875, issue of his paper:

So long as a man really desires to do right, to serve the Lord, to obey His commands, *we cannot withdraw from him*. We are willing to accept him as a brother, no matter how ignorant he may be, or how far short of the perfect standard his life may fall from his ignorance . . . We will maintain the truth, press the truth upon him, compromise not one word or iota of that truth, yet forbear with the ignorance, the weakness of our brother who is anxious, but not yet able to see the truth . . . Why should I not, when I fall so far short of perfect knowledge myself? *How do I know that the line beyond which ignorance damns, is behind me, not before me?* If I have no forbearance with his ignorance, how can I expect God to forbear with mine? . . . So long then as a man exhibits a teachable disposition, is willing to hear, to learn and obey the truth of God, I care not how far he may be, how ignorant he is, I am willing to recognize him as a brother.

While Lipscomb later seemed to adopt the precedent set by Sommer, his outlook in 1875 reflected that of the movement's founder.

Thirdly, as a basis for unity, Thomas Campbell appeals to the principle set forth in Romans 15, where Paul urges the strong to be patient with the weak and not to please themselves—following the example of Christ, who "did nothing to please himself" (verse 3). He then states that the scriptures were given for our learning and prays that God grant believers a spirit of unity so that they might glorify God with one voice, adding:

Therefore accept one another, *just as* Christ also has accepted you, to the glory of God (v. 7).

Campbell concluded that believers are to receive one another in the same manner and on the same terms upon which God has received them—with all their imperfections in understanding and behavior.

This means, in effect, that we must *not require* for fellowship *any more* than God requires for sonship.

Current Practice: Fellowship and Unity

Thomas Campbell's formula for fellowship and unity notwithstanding, Churches of Christ have historically followed the philosophy of Daniel Sommer in determining who is in fellowship with the local church.

In this context, fellowship is best defined by what one does *not* do. A member remains in fellowship so long as he does not engage in public moral misconduct or challenge the non-negotiable teachings of the particular Church of Christ faction of which he is a member.

In fact, a member may entirely misunderstand or privately disagree with the church's teaching and still be considered in full fellowship—provided he remains silent. However, expressing honest, reasoned dissent regarding a non-negotiable doctrine will result in excommunication or, in the language of insiders, "withdrawal of fellowship."

Current Practice: Withdrawing Fellowship

Following Daniel Sommer's philosophy of *preservation by separation*, modern-day Churches of Christ maintain lists of doctrinal positions that serve as "tests of fellowship"—though these lists are never written down. A member's agreement with the church's accepted interpretations is *assumed* unless he states

otherwise. This assumption creates an *illusion* of doctrinal uniformity.

The unspoken lists of doctrines required for fellowship vary not only from congregation to congregation but also from person to person—even within a single congregation. Publicly acknowledging such variation, however, would expose the inconsistency of basing unity on doctrinal uniformity—an ideal central to the identity of present-day Churches of Christ.

When a member is suspected of being "unsound" on a non-negotiable doctrinal issue, he is often subjected to a trial by the church. Barring a change in his understanding of the scripture in question, he is "withdrawn from" and avoided socially by other members of the congregation. Often, the church will send letters to sister congregations, marking the brother from whom they have withdrawn as "unsound" and unworthy of Christian association.

Of course the term "withdraw fellowship" is not biblical and the verb "disfellowship" appears nowhere in scripture. Spiritual fellowship is *of the Spirit* (Philippians 2:1). To have fellowship with God and with each other is to share or have in common God's Holy Spirit.⁶

Consequently, to withdraw spiritual fellowship would require the ability to take God's Spirit away from—or un-beget—one of his children. Evidently, that is something humans cannot do. Nevertheless, this terminology, which we will examine later, is still used by members of Churches of Christ.

My Perspective As An Insider

Having been born into an extended family who were all members of Churches of Christ, I was steeped in its culture from the cradle. Both my father and my maternal uncle were preachers in Churches of Christ. My maternal grandfather was

involved in the founding of one of our Christian colleges and served on its first board of trustees. My maternal grandmother was its first dorm mother. My parents met as students at the college. The president's family and ours were close friends.

My formal education began in a Christian elementary school owned and operated by Churches of Christ, as was the Christian high school from which I graduated—one which my mother and her brother had attended.

My first two years of higher education were at the Christian college where my grandfather served on the board of trustees. I also hold graduate degrees from the "school of religion" later created by that same college, which has since become a university. I also hold graduate degrees from a "school of religion" supported by Churches of Christ.

I began preaching in Churches of Christ at age 16, became salaried at age 19, and was in the mission field supported by congregations and members of Churches of Christ before I turned 21. I co-edited a Spanish language Church of Christ journal for a brief period and published occasional journals and tracts I had written in both Spanish and English. In my mid-30s, I served as an executive in a parachurch mission organization, supported by congregations and members of Churches of Christ, with projects in Latin America. I also taught Spanish and Missions for a brief period in an M.Div. program at the school from which I had graduated.

It was during my first foray into the mission field that my earlier training seemed to require that I "withdraw fellowship" from other members of Churches of Christ because of doctrinal differences. I was even at the point of having to withdraw from my own father when I realized that I really had little biblical or historical understanding of the matter of "withdrawing fellowship" from others as a means of church discipline or maintaining doctrinal purity.

It was then that I became aware of the scarcity of information available from writers in Churches of Christ regarding the criteria that should govern the practice. So I interviewed several well-known church leaders to ask them, *Upon what basis do we determine whether a member is to be withdrawn from?* That experience is an integral part of what led me to an answer to the question, *Can we be wrong about anything and go to heaven?*

That question, which anticipates an affirmative answer (else all would be lost), is designed to elicit the qualifying question, *Which things?* and, ultimately, a list of the non-negotiable doctrinal interpretations presumably required in order to go to heaven. The fact is, as observed earlier, no two lists of doctrines required for "fellowship" are alike.

Logically, this reality raises several other questions: *Which is the correct list? Who is to decide which list is the right one? Who is authorized to appoint the person who determines these things for the rest of us?* Ultimately, all of the above points to the absurdity of trying to establish fellowship with God on the basis of doctrinal agreement.

The remainder of this book explores the idea that fellowship consists in sharing God's Spirit—not doctrinal understanding—but whether God's Spirit dwells in you or in me is exclusively a matter of God's discretion and power. He alone can give the Spirit, and only he can take him away. So the idea of withdrawing spiritual fellowship is a biblical absurdity.

Finally, the book takes note of Paul's instruction to receive others on the same basis upon which God has received us—with all of our perceptual and behavioral shortcomings. If God is willing to share his Spirit with us, in whom he always perceives imperfection, how can we reject others because of the imperfections we perceive in them? Would this not be tantamount to expecting God to overlook in us that which we are

unwilling to overlook in others?

Although no one may speak for Churches of Christ with any official sanction, longtime insiders will attest that the views and practices described in this chapter fairly represent what the majority of members have believed and practiced throughout the latter half of the 20th century in the southeastern part of the United States. To the extent that this era of Church of Christ history is reflected in the present, what follows remains relevant to contemporary teaching and practice.

Although I was once withdrawn from and marked as a "false teacher" by a congregation of Churches of Christ, only to be received promptly by a sister congregation, I have no personal axe to grind. I spent the first forty years of my life in the bosom of Churches of Christ—the church was quite literally my life. For most of those years, I referred to it as *the* church, the *only* church. For me there were no other people of God except those who met under a signboard that read "The Church of Christ Meets Here," or something similar.

I vividly recall, as a six-year old, the horror I felt and the tears I cried as I was forced to enter a Baptist church where my father had been invited to speak to a Wednesday evening Bible class. As the organist began to play, I truly thought the floor would collapse at any moment and we would be swallowed into hell. Our presence there seemed to contradict everything I had been taught in my early childhood. It would be difficult to conclude that I had misunderstood the point of that training.

In closing these introductory remarks, I should observe that recent decades have brought remarkable change to the mainstream of Churches of Christ. While some of what follows will not be relevant to churches that have undergone that change, I hope my reflections will still be of value in understanding how the need for reform arose—at least from the perspective of one who from infancy was nurtured within its

teachings and traditions.



⇐ DIVINE LOVE ⇒

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1 Divine Love: Revealed in Jesus

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

The fulfillment of the above prophecy is found in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus (1:22–23). There we are told that the name *Immanuel* means *God with us*.⁷

For centuries, it was expected that the Messiah would come and restore the kingdom to Israel as a political power, sitting on David's throne and ruling the nations from Jerusalem. But the final form which the kingdom of God was to assume upon his arrival had been fundamentally misunderstood.

God Has Spoken Through His Son

At his transfiguration, Jesus appeared in the presence of Moses and Elijah. When Peter proposed to honor these, along with Jesus, he was interrupted by a voice from heaven that said:

This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen to him* (Luke 9:35).

Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, were important men through whom God had previously communicated his will. However, they were not to be held in the same regard as Jesus—who was radically different and superior to both. It was through Jesus that God would reveal the mystery of his will by revealing his divine nature.

At the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews, the author contrasts the manner in which God had previously communicated his will to humankind with how he had chosen to do so *in these last days*—in which "He has spoken to us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:1–2). The author then explains why this is significant:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and *the exact representation of his being* (1:3a).

To view Jesus simply as one more in a series of messengers sent by God to lead his people would be a serious misperception. Jesus was not only the Son of God, he was *the revelation of God*—of his divine nature—in human form.

Paul gives a similar description of Christ in his second letter to the Corinthians:

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, *who is the image of God* (2 Corinthians 4:4).

This is remarkably similar to the description of Jesus given to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (1:15).

That Jesus was the revelation of the life or nature of God in a human body is also clearly seen from additional statements in scripture:

And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (John 17:5).

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word (John 17:6).

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Colossians 2:9).

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (Philippians 2:5–6).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1–2, 14).

We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:20).

In summary, Jesus was the revelation of what God looks like in a human body. He experienced all that humans experience, being tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15)—showing thereby that the life that was in him

was the indestructible life of God (Hebrews 7:16).

The Basis for Morality—An Attitude of Heart

Given the following statements in scripture, it seems clear that God's judgment is based on the motives of one's heart:

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent *has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Matthew 5:28).

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the *thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12).

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose *the purposes of the heart*. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

The good person out of the good treasure of *his heart produces good*, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of *the heart his mouth speaks* (Luke 6:45).

For from within, *out of the heart of man*, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things *come from within, and they defile a person* (Mark 7:21-23).

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth *proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person*. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. *These are what defile a person*" (Matthew 15:17-20a).

From these statements, we may deduce that every word spoken and every act committed arises from a motive or purpose of heart. It is to the very intentions of the heart that God's discernment penetrates. These will eventually be disclosed and serve as the basis for final judgment for those who must stand upon their own moral record.

That God determines culpability by the purpose or intention of the heart, rather than by overt action, would seem an inescapable conclusion. Even in courts of human jurisprudence, one's intention is taken into account in determining the nature of the crime committed.

The Restoration of Filial and Parental Love

The canon of Old Testament scripture comes to a close with the following prophecy spoken by Malachi:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. *He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse* (Malachi 4:5–6).

This prophesy is echoed in Luke, where it has reference to John the Baptist:

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, *to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord* (Luke 1:7).

Scholars are generally divided over the correct translation of Malachi's prophecy. They are also divided in their understanding of its meaning. Some maintain that his call was to repentance and restoration of allegiance to the law of Moses, which Malachi had just mentioned—the "fathers" representing

the patriarchs who were faithful to God's covenant. However, the ultimate fulfillment of the Law was an appropriate *attitude of heart*—not national allegiance (Matthew 22:37–40).

It is my suspicion that when John came calling for a restoration of filial and parental love—to "make ready a people prepared for the Lord"—he was appealing to that form of human love that approximates, more closely than any other, the non-acquisitive, selfless nature of divine love.

A mother may grow tired of her spouse and divorce him, but her love for *her* children is relatively unconditioned and unlimited—regardless of the treatment she may receive at their hands.

In further support of the idea that John's work was that of a precursor of the reign of divine love, consider his reply, when asked by different groups, how they should prepare for the reign of heaven in keeping with his preaching:

‘What should we do then?’ the crowd asked.

John answered, ‘Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.’

Even tax collectors came to be baptised. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘what should we do?’

‘Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’

He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.’

It is noteworthy that to prepare for the rule of God in the heart, people of all walks of life were instructed by John to treat

others the way they would want to be treated under a variety of circumstances. This is the type of behavior that Jesus said "sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12), which, elsewhere, he says are fulfilled by love (Matthew 22:37–40).

Interestingly, the behavior that John said would prepare the heart for the rule of God clearly reflects Paul's description of conduct motivated by divine love in 1 Corinthians 13.

The Nature of God's Kingdom

When the apostle John opens his gospel, he makes a statement that is so obvious that it calls attention to itself. Relative to the Word, which he goes on to identify as Christ, he states:

In him was life (1:4a).

The fact that all living beings, by definition, have life in themselves makes this an unnecessary statement of the obvious if it refers to nothing more than human life. But the apparent superfluity of the statement calls upon the reader to pay close attention—to discover its true significance.

John continues:

"And that life was the light of men" (John 1:4b).

An elaboration of John's statement might go something like this:

The life which was with God and is God (and is now living with humankind) *is* the life of God (Ephesians 4:18). Consequently, it is not human life—which is corrupt and thereby finite. Rather, it is divine life, the life of God himself, and in *that* capacity it is the *light of humanity*. In other words, it is the kind of life that demonstrates both the

finite and corrupt nature of human life and, by contrast, the perfect or eternal nature of the life that is God's. But the heart of the unbeliever prevents his seeing the light of divine life. Consequently, he perceives it as foolishness.

When John quotes Jesus saying, "I have come that they may have life" (John 10:10), we are again confronted with a statement so ordinary that it calls attention to an implied significance beyond its face value. To offer life to those who have life would be disingenuous if the life offered is identical in nature to the life they already possess. Even if it refers metaphorically to a different style of life, or merely to a change of beliefs or outlook, the offer of life would still seem to be exaggerated.

The entire context of the advent of Immanuel—*God with us*—makes it clear that the life Jesus was offering to humans was life of a different kind—the life of God himself (Ephesians 4:18). This life not only differed quantitatively from human life, it differed essentially. It was of a different nature—one whose definition required demonstration.

The Nature of Human Life

If we are to understand the new life that Jesus offers, we must first have a clear understanding of life itself—its most elementary form, beyond which it cannot be practically reduced.

Human life in its moral dimension consists essentially of what one consciously *thinks, says, or does*. Yet, according to Jesus, all such thoughts, communications, and actions proceed from the heart, the source of human motivation or purpose (Matthew 5:38; 15:18).

The fact that humans are free to choose between moral alternatives—or choose between alternative purposes or motives—identifies them as being made in the image of their creator and

makes them morally accountable to him.

Humans were placed in a paradise where every legitimate need was unquestionably supplied. They could desire nothing that could be called “good,” in any true sense, beyond what they already had. Nevertheless, the woman was deceived into falsely perceiving a *need* or a desire for something that *seemed good* for her, although it was not.

This deception or illusion was based on an appeal to her senses, and was entirely *self-serving*—which was the primary source of the deception. To eat of the forbidden fruit served no purpose in the universe but her own—to satisfy a legitimate craving in a *way* that God had declared *illegitimate*. This meant that, ultimately, her basic craving could never be truly satisfied in this way.

The woman was faced with a choice between moral alternatives: she could either follow the self-serving, albeit deceptive, motive to do what *appeared* to have the prospect of satisfying her appetite, or she could listen to the voice of God, allowing him to determine the purpose of her life and to define for her what was, in fact, real and good.

Her decision, which would prove to be self-destructive—rather than genuinely self-serving—split her personality in two—enabling her to *know* or experience the nature of sin, but without the nature to overcome its deceptive appeal.

From that moment forward, all humans have continued to be self-centered and self-seeking in their fundamental orientation toward others and the material universe. And in this regard, David noted and Paul affirmed:

There is no one who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:3; Romans 3:12).

After the first woman's son had taken the life of his brother

because he was displeased that his brother, rather than he, had received God's approval, he was confronted by God with a question:

"Where is your brother?"

This question clearly implied an expectation of personal responsibility for his brother's welfare.

Cain's reply to God also took the form of a question—one that reflects the self-centered world view of fallen humanity:

"Am I my brother's keeper?"

While the implicit answer to the question was clearly, "Yes! You were created to look like your creator," it was only after God had been revealed in human form (John 1:18) that humanity was able to catch a glimpse of his true nature and, consequently, of what man was created to be.

But the full extent of the nature of God was not fully disclosed until he was seen, in the person of his Son, hanging on a Roman cross—guiltless, yet bearing the guilt of all humanity.

At the moment Jesus spoke the words, "It is finished!" *the full extent of his love* became apparent. In him, what it means to be the keeper of one's brothers became unmistakably clear.

As John later wrote:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16)

The Moral Dilemma

It seems self-evident that there are only two potential

motives that may prompt what humans consciously think, communicate, or do. These are derived from two alternative purposes which are mutually exclusive. They are reflected in Romans 7 and Galatians 5.

The contrast of motives for human conduct may be seen in the conflict between the desires of the flesh or "*sinful nature*," and those of the "*inner being*." While the inner being delights in the good of God's law, the flesh is deceived into doing what the inner being has no desire to do (Romans 7:7–23). As Jesus said, *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak* (Matthew 26:41).

In this conflict of forces, Paul recognizes that, on the one hand, the inner being desires to do good, while the flesh or sinful nature, *being deceived*, desires to do evil. This presents man with a moral dilemma:

For what *I* do is not the good *I* want to do; no, the evil *I* do not want to do—this *I* keep on doing (Romans 7:19).

In the above statement, Paul uses the pronoun "*I*" to refer to two different aspects of his being. Below, it has been replaced with either "*sinful nature*" (the flesh) or "*inner being*" (the spiritual self):

For what the *sinful nature* does is not the good the *inner self* wants to do; no, the evil the *inner self* does not want to do—this the *sinful nature* keeps on doing.

Left to its own resources, the flesh is powerless to completely overcome self-service. Even if one succeeds in avoiding the overt act, the covetous desire may remain. No one can tame the heart out of which the tongue speaks (Luke 6:45; James 3:8).

Paul says he was made aware of this internal conflict when he became aware of the law that forbids the service of self over others—"thou shalt not covet!" He describes the effect of that

awareness in these words:

But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead (Romans 7:8).

This same conflict is described by Paul in Galatians, where he observes: ". . . so that you do not do what you want" (5:17).

This, then, is the moral dilemma faced by every human being who is old enough to distinguish right from wrong: While one may know what right conduct is, he does not naturally possess the moral power with which to always control his thoughts or to act or speak according to his better judgment—let him who is without fault in this regard recall the words of John: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

The Call to Repentance—A Call to Sacrifice Self

That the life of God should be manifested in the cross was quite contrary to what the Jews had envisioned regarding the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. They were anticipating a show of force, not one of apparent surrender to the enemy. But, of course, they had misidentified the true enemy of the people of God. Consequently, as John writes:

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11).

Overall, the failing of the Jews to receive Jesus and his teaching was due to their misguided view regarding his identity and the nature of his reign. Since they were operating on the basis of a false premise, "reality" for them was forced to conform to their mistaken worldview.

Consequently, they were not prepared to recognize the

Messiah nor to understand the nature of the reign of God in the heart. Such language of Jesus as the following seemed foolish:

Whoever finds his life will lose it, and *whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Matthew 10:39).

And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . . any of you *who does not give up everything he has* cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:27, 33).

Since the reign of God under the new covenant was to be in the heart of the believer, in the form of new life—the life of God—it was necessary that the heart be emptied of the life of self-service in order to receive the life of him who came to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28).

The Dilemma Resolved

The dilemma created by the desire of the inner being to do the will of God, and the desire of the fallen nature to please self, can be resolved only when one submits to God in living faith. The resulting conflict may be described as follows:

First, since the believer has been hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3), he is no longer under condemnation. Jesus has kept the law on his behalf—fulfilling all righteousness in a human body—which no human could do—and assigning that righteousness to those who put their faith in him—something only God could do.

Secondly, those who have put their trust in Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27). They are one spirit with him (1 Corinthians 6:17). They have been clothed with God—with the armor of his power—the armor of light, the armor of righteousness. They alone have been given the ability to overcome the flesh. So the ability is not theirs. It is the power of Christ living in them in the person of his Spirit. That is why they

are told to serve *in the strength which God supplies* (1 Peter 4:11), and to recognize, as did Paul, that their competence comes from God (2 Corinthians 3:5).

The sinful nature, to use Paul's term, always expresses itself from a purpose or motive oriented toward self. It is egocentric, inclined toward self-service, self-promotion, and a preference for self over others. It perceives others as objects to be used, rather than subjects to be served.

On the contrary, the Spirit defers to others over self. Its leading is a motive which is other-centric, oriented toward serving, honoring, and preferring others. It renounces its own life in order to live on behalf of others, starting with the members of his immediate family.

In the final analysis, one cannot serve both God and self.

2 Divine Love: Distinct from Human Love

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Divine love is not human love *for* God—the *caritas* of medieval theology. It is a phenomenon that was unknown and unimaginable prior to the advent of Jesus into the world (1 Corinthians 2:6–10). In fact, there was no adequate word for it in the Greek language. Consequently, the Holy Spirit chose to re-purpose the word *agape* and redefine it by the life of Jesus.

The fact that we use the English noun *love* to translate the word *agape* doesn't mean that human love and divine love are commensurate. They are not. But they both provide purpose or motive for human behavior. Yet it is here that they radically differ.

The Nature of Human Love

Human love has been corrupted by the fall and, unlike divine love, is ultimately self-centered, self-serving, and self-seeking. Consequently, it cannot sacrifice itself for the sake of that which it despises or in which it perceives no value.

The selfish nature of human love is depicted in statements of Jesus such as the following:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?
Even "sinners" love those who love them.

And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" do that.

And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even "sinners" lend to "sinners," expecting to be repaid in full (Luke 6:31–34).

It is characteristic of humans to expect to be reciprocated—to receive something in return for something given. One who loves expects to be loved in return. Favors are extended with the expectation that they will be returned. In contrast, Jesus taught that correct conduct should not be driven by such a motive.

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, *they may invite you back* and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although *they cannot repay you*, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

It is for the same reason that James says that "pure religion" is this:

To look after orphans and widows in their distress
and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world

(James 1:27).

Widows and orphans correspond to a class of people who cannot reciprocate the good that is done to them. To help them, then, implies a motive other than self-interest.

In contrasting divine love with human love, the apostle Paul states that Christ died for the ungodly when they were powerless. He then contrasts that act with what is observed in human behavior:

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: *While we were still sinners*, Christ died for us (Romans 5:6–8).

In other words, human love might sacrifice itself for another, but only on the *condition* that the other be of exceptional character. Anders Nygren would describe this as *acquisitive* love.⁸ While behavior of this type may appear to be self-sacrificial, it is motivated by a desire to preserve something of value to itself, something in which it perceives virtue or moral worth (Romans 5:7–8).

Human love is seen clearly in the well-known question, "What's in it for me?" This is the fundamental basis of human outlook. When Job lost all that he had and failed to reject God, Satan was convinced that by threatening his life Job would relent. He asserted before God:

'Skin for skin!' Satan replied. 'A man will give all he has for his own life (Job 2:4).

Satan could not imagine that a man would forfeit his own life out of deference to God. He was convinced that if God took away Job's health and threatened to take away his life, his loyalty to God would not persist. He assumed that Job served God because of the personal benefits he derived from such

service.

The English Word "Love"

Although the Greek language of the New Testament scriptures had multiple words for expressing what is always, in English, translated as "love," the English word *love* defies precise definition. It represents such a diversity of feelings and dispositions that its meaning can only be determine from the context in which it is used. For example, we say such things as:

I love tomato soup.

I love music.

I love my dog.

I love my mom.

I love my wife.

I love my daughter.

I love the church.

I love God.

In *none* of these expressions does the word *love* have the same connotation—and examples of this type could be multiplied.

In the Middle Ages, the phrase "love of God" came to be understood as one's love *for* God—an affection for God. Such affection was prompted by a desire to associate with the goodness and blessedness of God—the highest goodness, the most desirable object—reflecting, perhaps, a platonic view of the ideal.

The modern idea of love for God has been referred to as *aspirational* love, love that seeks union with God since he is the highest good and much to be desired. This concept has all the elements of self-interest associated with it.

Take, for example, the idea of the "mansion just over the hilltop." While the love *for* God out of which one seeks such things may include an element of self-sacrifice, it is always self-sacrifice as a means to a selfish end—to avoid punishment and gain a reward. In fact, it might be that most Christians of today see Christianity in just such terms without recognizing how contrary such desires are to the nature of divine love as characterized in 1 Corinthians 13.

Divine Love is Unprovoked

Divine love is wholly unprovoked. It is not prompted or elicited by any perceived value in an object. Rather, it wills to act on behalf of its object without any external provocation. God's love is proactive: It isn't prompted or motivated by anything external to itself. God loves because he is by nature disposed to do so. Consequently, God is able to love his enemies despite the fact that they utterly disgust him—he cannot be pleased by them.

Among the Greeks and Romans, the idea that a god would have any interest in humans was absurd. They already had everything they desired and found nothing of value or interest in things terrestrial, other than, perhaps, sources of amusement. to amuse themselves. Their love was an *acquisitive* love—they loved only that from which they derived pleasure or some other benefit. Consequently, to be "saved," in the Platonic sense, required that one ascend to where the gods were—that is, climb the ladder to heaven by turning away from the world of sense experience and focusing on the ideal.

To the polytheistic mind of the first century, the idea that a god would descend and take on the form of a human and give up his life for other humans was an absurdity.

For the Jews, the idea that righteousness must be *received as a gift*, rather than conferred upon one who had adhered to the law *perfectly*, was so contrary to their view that they rejected it outright (1 Corinthians 1:22–23).

3 Divine Love Is Divine Light

Concerning the coming of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied:

The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great *light*, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a *light* dawned (9:2)

The metaphors of light and darkness represent opposite states—one positive and the other negative. In Isaiah's prophecy, the historical contrast seems to have been between hope and despair. In its fulfillment in Jesus, however, all conflict or tension is ultimately resolved.

The Light of Life

Early in his ministry, Jesus asserted that his purpose in coming was to fulfill the law and the prophets. However, the law and the prophets could be fulfilled only by one who was righteous—who could keep *all* the law without failing in a single point.

When John opens his gospel, he starts at the beginning—when all things came into being through the Word (the λόγος, later identified as Christ), who was God (1:1–3).

Christ is then introduced as "the light of men" (1:4), in

keeping with Isaiah's prophecy. He was not light in the sense of intellectual illumination. He hadn't come simply to enable men to correctly articulate a philosophy of life or to replace one moral code with another. John says:

In him was *life*, and that life was the *light* of men (1:4).

While all that Jesus taught was true, and was reflected in his life, it was not his teaching that he came to share, but his life.

I have come *that they may have life*, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

The life of Jesus was the life of God (Ephesians 4:18). So he could truthfully say:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have *the light of life* (John 8:12).

As observed earlier, the life of Jesus not only revealed the life or nature of God, it revealed, by contrast, the nature of fallen humanity.

The Light That Is Not Darkness

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is diseased, your body is full of darkness. Therefore *see to it that the light in you is not darkness*. If then your whole body is full of light, with no part in the dark, it will be as full of light as when the light of a lamp shines on you (Luke 11:34–36).

What the eye conveys to the mind is perceived to be reality. This prompts the body to respond in a manner appropriate to what the mind perceives. When one's fundamental purpose or orientation in life is contrary to that of God, then one's life is lived with a false perspective. Such "light" is darkness—what is

perceived as reality is ultimately a fantasy.

That doesn't mean that one is totally lacking in the wisdom of this world. But such wisdom is limited to this world and does not take into account the reality of life beyond the physical dimension. In this respect, man is limited to finite math and fails in his attempts to evaluate infinite reality. Or, in the words of Jesus, "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his own soul?

One's perspective, as depicted by Jesus in his use of the word *light*, is the overarching purpose of one's life—one's worldview. Its function is to shape one's values and, consequently, one's behavior and attitude. Jesus goes on to explain that when that purpose or basic orientation to life is misguided, one lives in darkness or in vain. His worldview or guiding purpose in life is contrary to reality. He walks in *darkness*.

When Jesus came to usher in that period of human history in which God lives within the heart of the believer through the presence of his Spirit, he is introduced as the "life" which became "the light of men." The life that was in him was real, and served to correctly orient the thinking and attitude of those who believed that he was who he claimed to be. He was the revelation of what eternal life looks like in a human context.

To Live As Children Of Light

Paul begins the fifth chapter of Ephesians by admonishing his readers to "live a life of love," that is, to give up their lives in service to each other just as the Lord gave himself up for us (verse 2; see also 1 John 3:16).

He then uses a metaphor for love when he admonishes:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (5:8).

That "light" and "love" are used synonymously is evident from the fact that "the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth" (verse 9), all of which proceed from the motive of divine love (Galatians 5:2; 1 John 3:10-11; Romans 13:10; Ephesians 4:15; John 1:1-3).

This may also be seen from the following:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever *lives by the truth* comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done *has been done through God*.

To *live by the truth* is to live according to the character of Christ, who is the Truth. It is to walk after, or be motivated by, the Spirit of divine love, which sacrifices self in order to allow one's life to be used by the Spirit to engage in the good works—works of service—for which we were created.

Self-service is darkness. It is hatred. It opposes the love which is not self-seeking. But those who live the life that is *life indeed*, desire to have it plainly seen that the works that are done through them are "done through God"—by the power of his love.

Paul goes on to explain that light exposes everything for what it is. By its presence it makes everything visible, making evident the motive of heart, "works of darkness" being shown to be deceptive and self-serving. So he exhorts his readers:

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them (verse 11).

To have nothing to do with such deeds is to avoid the motive from which they proceed. To expose them is to show that they proceed from self-interest alone and never depict reality.

Paul concludes by urging the Ephesian disciples not to be foolish. Rather, they should understand what the will of the Lord is (verse 17).

To understand the divine will, one must first offer his body to God as a living sacrifice and be transformed into the image of Christ. To do so results in a spiritual perception of what is God's good, pleasing, and perfect will (Romans 12:1–2). It also comes as divine love grows in the heart, resulting in an increase of knowledge and depth of insight, enabling one to "discern what is best" (Philippians 1:9–10).

Understanding the will of the Lord does not come about by an increase in the knowledge of scripture, although such an increase has the potential for directing one toward how God's will is to be understood. The Ephesians did not have the New Testament scriptures, nor were they available as such for hundreds of years.

Understanding the will of God is a matter of spiritual discernment. It is the Spirit who enables us to "understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). In fact, one cannot understand the things of God without the enlightening of the divine love of God's Spirit.

While the scriptures enable us to understand what God is doing and how he proceeds, it is the scriptures that point us to the Spirit of Christ who enables us to understand what is spiritually discerned—that which requires the knowledge and depth of insight that the presence of divine love in the heart provides (Philippians 1:9). It is the experience of divine love in the heart that provides the key to distinguishing right from wrong (Hebrews 5:14).

Since divine love makes all things visible by exposing the motive behind the deed, Paul admonishes his readers to wake up to reality and allow the light of the Spirit of Christ to enlighten them (verse 14). This would enable them to live as wise, and not as unwise servants (verse 15).

The light of divine love is what constitutes the wisdom that comes from above. Such wisdom is considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (James 3:17)—all of which proceed from divine love.

In contrast, the wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, envious, and selfish, is of the devil (James 3:14–15). It is the source of "every evil practice" (verse 16). Such practices proceed from a heart filled with darkness—devoid of the light of divine love. Of such things, Paul wrote to the Romans:

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger (2:8).

He further admonishes:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil. cling to what is good. Be *devoted to one another in brotherly love*. Honor one another *above yourselves*. . . . *Share with God's people who are in need*. . . Do not be proud, but be willing to *associate with people of low position*. . . . *overcome evil with good* (12:9–10, 13, 16, 21).

To live as children of light is to be devoted to our brothers in love—as if they were Christ himself. It is to love as Jesus loved—in humility, honoring one another *above* ourselves, sharing with those in need as if their needs were our own, living in victory over the evil of the flesh by allowing divine love to change our outlook so that we view others as subjects to be served, rather than objects to be used.

4 Divine Love: Manifested as Divine Glory

The "life of God" (Ephesians 4:18) that was in Jesus may be described as "*life that is truly life*" (1 Timothy 6:19, NIV). It is life that is free from illusion and deception. It is all that it seems to be. It is consistent, honest, singular in purpose, not duplicitous. And it has no end. It is, therefore, "indestructible" (Hebrews 7:16).

Human life, on the other hand, due to its fallen nature, is never what it seems. It is built on false premises and false hope—one that fails to transcend the grave—and it is often deceived by feelings or impressions derived from sensory experience.

To ignore God's reality—his moral perfection, his imperative that we conform to his standard, and a final reckoning of whether we did so (Acts 24:25)—is ultimately self-destructive. It is to accept a counterfeit—to confuse reality with a fantasy.

When measured by the glory of God, fallen humanity fails to meet the standard. As Paul observes:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23).

The *glory of God* is here to be understood as God's nature or character. He is right in all of his ways (Psalm 145:17). No human, other than Jesus, could ever make such a claim. God's character or glory is the standard against which all behavior is ultimately judged to be good or evil. Since all humans fall short of that standard, they fall short of his glory.

This makes it impossible for anyone to be righteous or guiltless before God, since no one, other than Jesus, was able to live a sinless life. To be righteous is to be morally perfect—to never have had a single self-serving thought, ever.

For God to make justification possible, he had to do so by offering it as a gift, *ascribing* it to those who put their faith in the

righteousness that Christ *achieved*.

Called to Share in the Divine Glory

Paul observes that having been justified through faith, we now have peace with God. In addition, we rejoice "in the hope of the glory of God" (5:1–2).

It is to this same *glory of God* that Paul refers to when he writes:

And we, who with unveiled faces all *reflect the Lord's glory*, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Here, the Lord's *glory* and his *likeness* are seen to refer to the same reality. When we are made to reflect his glory, it is his likeness we are reflecting. While one may glorify God by praising him verbally, the glory here referred to is that of his character or nature which we come to reflect as he grows and matures within us.

Paul goes on to explain that the same God who said "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the *knowledge of the glory of God* in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). To know the glory of God is not to know *about* it, but to *experience* it.

With regard to our sharing in God's glory—the glory of being divine—Paul makes a definitive statement to the Colossians. He first informs them that he was commissioned by God to present to them the word of God in its fullness (1:25). It had been hidden for ages in a mystery (1:26) which Paul now makes known to them. That mystery, he asserts, is simply this:

Christ in you, the hope of glory (1:27)

Paul says this is the essential message of the gospel. It says it all! This is what the writer of Hebrews alludes to when he writes about God "bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). This is a summation of God's ultimate purpose in creation and redemption.

However, to the Thessalonians—whom God chose to save through belief in the truth and the sanctifying (or holy-fying) work of the Spirit—Paul makes an unequivocal assertion:

He called you to this through our gospel that you might
share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:14).

Consistent with such statements, Peter informs his readers that "the Spirit of glory" rests on you. The Spirit of glory is the Spirit of God (1 Peter 4:14).

If we are God's children, Paul says to the Romans, we are led by his Spirit (8:14) and share in his glory (8:17). That glory "will be revealed in us" when the sons of God are finally revealed (8:18–19). At that time, we will share fully the image of God—which is his glory (1 John 3:2; John 2:11).

5 Divine Love: The Practice of the Truth

You were taught by him [Christ] (just as *truth* is in Jesus), that you . . . put on the new man (in accordance with God), who is created in righteousness and holiness from the *truth* (Ephesians 4:21–24, LEB)

It is evident from this statement that, whatever *the truth* may refer to, it is *in* Jesus. It is also apparent that the new man, with whom believers are to be clothed, is characterized by righteousness and holiness which are *from the truth*.

Jesus said of himself, "I am the way, *the truth*, and the life (John 14:6). To be clothed with the righteousness and holiness of the truth is to be clothed with Christ. It is to have new life—the

life of God. It is to walk in the way that is real—that is not temporal. It is to live "according to God," which is to live his life, reflecting his character.

In the new covenant scriptures the word truth is used (1) to refer to discourse revealed *from* God, which is in keeping with and reflects his nature, and (2) to refer to the revelation *of* God himself, as manifested in his Spirit and in his Son. In both cases, however, what is revealed is the same. Consequently, Jesus said:

The Spirit is the one who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life (John 6:63).

The words of Jesus were words of life because they were spoken by the eternal Spirit through whom God's life is conveyed. His words were not literally "life" any more than his flesh was literal bread to be physically consumed. Rather, his words were spoken by him who is life, and reflected reality consistent with the nature of that life.

But it was not ultimately words that Jesus came to give. It was life—represented in the truths or realities of which he spoke and demonstrated in the manner in which he interacted with others. To have life, and have it abundantly, requires that it be received, as a gift—something the unbelieving Jews could not accept.

Paul made clear that to have the life of God, it was not necessary that man ascend to heaven to bring Christ down (to die on the cross), or descend into the grave to bring him back from the dead (Romans 10:6–7).

In other words, it was not within the power of humans to bring about their own salvation. To do so would require absolute moral perfection. Since such is beyond the ability of humankind, Jesus informed his audience that "the work of God" is to believe that Jesus is eternal life and will give it to all who put their trust

in what he has done on their behalf.

No man can be morally perfect. Therefore, no man can be righteous by any means other than by faith in the perfection of Christ on his behalf. To those who so believe, God gives *credit* for everything Christ has *done*—as if we had done it ourselves. That is the grace in which we stand.

Jesus said: "I *am* the truth" (John 14:6).

While not contradicting Jesus, John wrote that "the Spirit is the truth" (1 John 5:6). This is true because Paul says, "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17–18).

John wrote that the truth lives in us:

The elder, To the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who *know the truth*—because of the truth, *which lives in us and will be with us* forever (2 John 1:1–2).

That this cannot refer to knowledge or understanding of the scriptures is clear since the new covenant scriptures had not yet been completed and would not exist as a recognized collection of inspired books for another two hundred years. Furthermore, Paul makes clear that (1) our knowledge is incomplete (1 Corinthians 8:2–3) and that (2) "Where there is knowledge, it will pass away" (1 Corinthians 13:8)—leaving only divine love. To know the truth is not to know *about* it, but to live or experience the life of him who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

Often it is difficult to determine the sense in which the word *truth* is used, but it is never intended to mean human deductions as to the meaning of scripture. "The truth" is never to be equated with "our understanding" of what the scriptures mean by what they say, since no one knows anything "as he ought to know," that is, completely or perfectly. The scriptures nowhere

assure us that sincerity in attempting to understand scripture guarantees a successful outcome. Furthermore, any statement of truth will always conform to the character of God, as may be seen from the following statements:

If anyone teaches other doctrine and does not devote himself to the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and *the teaching that is in accordance with godliness*, he is conceited, understanding nothing . . . (1 Timothy 6:3, LEB)

Paul, a slave of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of the chosen of God and the *knowledge of the truth* that is *according to godliness* . . . (Titus 1:1, LEB)

It is important to distinguish between propositional truth revealed by the Spirit and the Spirit himself. Believing the revelation of the Spirit to be true, or advocating a certain understanding of that revelation, is not the equivalent of having a "knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3) or "walking in truth" (2 John 1:4) or to "live by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16).

If one does not have the Spirit of truth living in his inner being, he does not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9)—regardless of how loudly he may defend and promote his understanding of what the Spirit has communicated. Having the Spirit himself in the heart of faith is all that counts (Galatians 5:6).

Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (John 6:53).

It is also true that if I have all knowledge but have not the truth living in me, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

The Truth Is Not Self-Seeking

But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger (Romans 2:8)

With these words, Paul declares that truth is not self-seeking, and that to reject the truth is to follow evil—which is to be self-seeking. This description of "the truth" is identical to that of divine love, which "is not self-seeking" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Paul is not here referring to two things—(1) being self-seeking and (2) rejecting the truth. Rather, he is saying that one who is self-seeking is rejecting the truth—not propositional truth but the reality of God—the character of God whose nature is never self-seeking. To choose to be self-seeking is to choose to be unlike God.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul contrasts the *truth* with *evil*—the moral conduct that opposes divine love.

Love does not delight in *evil* but rejoices with the *truth* (1 Corinthians 13:6).

If "the truth" in this statement had reference to *doctrinal* deductions from scripture, Paul would have contrasted it with intellectual misunderstanding rather than with evil, which is of a moral nature.

In the following statement, Paul relates truth to divine love:

Instead [of being immature in our faith, v. 14], speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

The Greek original of this text—ἀληθεύοντες (truth) δὲ (but) ἐν (in) ἀγάπῃ (love)—does not contain the word "speaking." It is included by many translators, however, because they understand the *truth* spoken of here to be propositional, or something to be communicated through

discourse.

I prefer those translations which regard *truth* as something to be possessed and practiced.⁹ The New English Translation, for example, reads:

But practicing the truth in love . . ."

It is my conclusion that Paul's reference here is specifically related to *how* one becomes spiritually mature.

"Practicing the truth in love" (v. 15) is the continuation of a thought begun in verse 11:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service.

He goes on to say that growth in the body occurs as a function of divine love. He then makes that growth contingent on each part of the body doing its work. That work is referred to as "works of service" which are performed "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 12)—not in number, but in holiness through the exercise of divine love.

The admonition to practice or do "the truth in love" is followed by an explanation of *why* and *what it means*:

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (v. 16).

Paul's explanation is this:

Growth in the body occurs as a function of divine love. It is contingent on each part of the body engaging in works of service, motivated by divine love. These are performed "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (v. 12).

"Practicing the truth in love" simply explains *how* the body grows. And love cannot increase without an increase in works of service which divine love is always practicing.

This increase in love, demonstrated by works of service, will result in our being united in the knowledge of the Son of God. It will result in our becoming *mature*—attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God. By no means could this be interpreted as sharing the infinite knowledge contained by the mind of God. Rather, it evidently has reference to our sharing the nature of God—his Spirit or his holy character. The fact of our sharing his Holy Spirit in common makes us one with the Father and with the Son and with each other.

Paul wrote to the Galatians that his refusal to give in to those who wanted to impose obedience to God's law as a condition for acceptance into the fellowship was "so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you" (2:5). It was to that same "truth of the gospel" that Paul refers a few verses later when Peter segregated Jewish and Gentile brothers at meal time. Paul rebuked Peter because he and those who followed his example were "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). That truth is simply God's nature.

To act in a way that is in line with or according to the truth of the gospel is to treat others the way one would want to be treated—to act in a way that reflects the nature of the Spirit of God.

6 Divine Love: The Experience of the Divine Presence

When Peter begins his second epistle, he asserts that grace and peace *come through the knowledge of God* and of Christ. That this type of knowledge is not of the cognitive type, he goes on to explain:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness *through our knowledge of him* who called us by *his own glory and goodness*. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that *through them* you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:3–4).

In this statement, Peter reveals that everything that is needed to live a godly life is *given* to us as a result of our being made to share in the divine nature or character of God. It is not theological knowledge that enables us to escape evil desires. It is the Spirit or nature of God. This is the power or strength that God provides (Ephesians 3:16; 1 Peter 4:11). It is the power of his might—the full armor which is God (Ephesians 6:10–11).

Peter continues by admonishing that certain qualities be added to one's character so as to be effective and productive in our *knowledge* of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is in this *knowledge*—received by *grace*—that Peter urges his readers to *grow* (2 Peter 3:18).

That *knowledge* of this type is *experienced* as the effect of God supplying the motive for the believer's disposition and action (Philippians 2:23) seems an unavoidable conclusion when we consider the following statement of John:

Whoever does not love does not *know* God, because God is love (1 John 4:8).

While one may become better informed regarding the characteristics of divine love by reading the new covenant scriptures, they are not the object of the *knowledge of God* of which John speaks. That we are to love with the divine love of Jesus is a propositional truth regarding that love. However, to *love* like Jesus one must *experience* that love. However, to experience divine love doesn't require that it be understood.

Since divine love cannot be fully comprehended, it must be *known through experience*. This sense of the verb *to know* is first found in the older translations of Genesis 4:1, where it is used as a circumlocution for the physical intimacy of the marriage bond: "Adam *knew* his wife Eve."

The experiential use of the verb *to know* is readily recognized in the difference between knowing *about* a father's love for his children and knowing that love by *being* a father. In the apostolic letters, knowledge is often used in this experiential sense with reference to God living in the believer through the medium of his Spirit.

For example, Paul writes to the Ephesians:

And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God *lives* by his Spirit" (2:22).

Paul also prays that God may strengthen them with power through his Spirit "so that," as a consequence of being strengthened in their inner being, "Christ may *dwell* in your hearts through faith" (3:16-17).

This same concept is expressed in his letter to the disciples in Rome:

"You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God *lives* in you" (8:9).

He then continues:

But if Christ is *in* you, then . . . the Spirit *gives* life because of righteousness. . . . And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is *living* in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give *life* to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who *lives* in you (8:9-11).

In these statements, Paul asserts that Christ being "in you"

means that the Spirit has given life to your *mortal* bodies. In other words, *the Spirit lives in you* because Christ is living in you. You have received his life because you have died! His righteousness has been assigned to you, whereby you are hidden with him in God (Colossians 3:3).

From these statements it isn't difficult to see that for God's Spirit to *live* in us is to experience his presence as the power to love as he does.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul made his readers aware that when one unites himself with a prostitute, he becomes "one flesh" with her. He explains that this is similar to what happens when one becomes united with the Lord—he becomes "one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

In this context, Paul explains:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, *who is in you*, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies (1 Corinthians 6:16-20).

Understanding "the Holy Spirit, who is in you" and "whom you have received from God" metaphorically would be as misguided as interpreting "one flesh" or "unites himself with a prostitute" as referring to a purely platonic relationship.

In his first letter, John observes

"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God *lives* in us, and *his love* is made complete [mature] in us. We *know* that we *live* in him and he in us, because he has given us of *his Spirit*. . . . If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God *lives* in him and he in God. . . . Whoever *lives* in love *lives* in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:12-13, 15-16).

For God to reside in our hearts is to experience the ability to love like God loves.

7 Divine Love: The Source and Power of Obedience

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The night Jesus came walking upon the Sea of Galilee, Peter challenged him, saying, "Lord if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." To this Jesus replied: "Come on!" Then a most remarkable statement follows, one that is recorded only in the gospel of Matthew:

Then Peter got down out of the boat, *walked on the water* and came toward Jesus (Matthew 14:28–29).

While Peter was walking on the water, he was momentarily distracted by the threat of the wind and waves, and he looked away from Jesus. In that instant, he was reminded that he was doing what was impossible for a human being, and he could not ignore the fact that the wind and the waves had the power to take his life. Yet, there was Jesus, unquestionably walking on water, and empowering him to do the same.

At that moment, Peter was faced with the decision as to which version of reality he would accept. Would he put his faith in the power of the wind and waves or in the power of God to rule over them? Should he continue to look to Jesus for the power to do what was not humanly possible, or to focus on what appeared to be a genuine and immediate threat to his life and fall back upon his own resources?

In order to obey the command that Jesus twice identified as uniquely *his*—to love *as* he loved—one must be empowered beyond natural human ability. To *love like Christ loved*, one must

be as Christ is, and this is precisely the end to which Paul prayed on behalf of the Ephesian disciples:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may *strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith* (3:16-17a).

Having Christ live in their hearts would enable the Ephesians to grasp the dimensions of his love—how far it will go in serving the needs of others.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, *may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ* (3:17b–18).

As he continued to pray, he asked that they not only come to know *about* that love, but that they *experience* it as well!—to know it in a way that cannot otherwise be known:

And to know this love that *surpasses* knowledge (3:19a).

Paul describes the effect of experiencing Christ's divine love—loving with the same love with which Jesus loves—as being filled with God's own fullness:

That you may be filled to *the measure of all the fullness of God* (3:19b).

This is the same terminology Paul uses in Colossians to describe the deity of Christ (2:9) and in Ephesians to define Christian maturity:

... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the *knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (Ephesians 4:13).

It is upon the premise of "Christ in you"—or "Christ who is your life"—that we have hope (Colossians 1:27). And if Christ

is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), *then Christ in us* means that the divine love of God has been poured out into our hearts! (Romans 5:5).

In the same general context, Jesus says:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; *apart from me you can do nothing* (John 15:5).

The imagery of this metaphor seems clearly to mean that any good work done by us is the work of the Spirit of Christ, directing our motives as we will and work.

With respect to God working through the believer, there can hardly be "man's part" and "God's part" any more than there can be the "branch's part" and the "vine's part." What is done in the branch *is* the work of the vine *in the branch*, not simply in response to some propositional or written instruction *from* the vine.

This in no way circumvents the will of the individual believer. This may be seen from several statements of Paul:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to *work out your salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

It is implicit in this statement that the human will must cooperate with the divine will. It is the spiritual man, the "inner being" which *allows* God to work through him.

Because those *who are led* by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Romans 8:14)

Here the willingness of the inner being to allow itself to be led is evident, since one cannot be "led" by the Spirit who resists

his leading.

Working together with Him, we also appeal to you, "*Don't receive God's grace in vain*" (2 Corinthians 6:1).

In this statement, the verb "to work together" (συνεργέω) implies cooperation on the part of the recipient of God's grace. While the gift is unilateral, it must be willingly received if at all.

Upon the birth of John the Baptist, his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. . . to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to *enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days* (Luke 1:68, 74).

There may be some who assume that the above prophecy meant simply that Jesus would die for our sins, give us a book, and hope that we could understand enough of it and have the fortitude and self-discipline sufficient to live righteously before him all of our days. But they must limit the word *righteously* to the outward obedience to a few select commands regarding morality and church organization and doctrine.

I believe this is a regrettable and potentially damnable point of view.

It is my understanding of Zechariah's prophecy, corroborated by most of the new covenant scriptures, that God has attributed to us who believe the righteousness of Christ himself, and has poured out his divine love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit to transform us into the character of his son. It is the Spirit who enables us to live in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our lives by enabling us to do the good works for which we were created.

As Paul affirmed:

For our reason for boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, in holiness and *purity of motive from God*, not in merely human wisdom, but by the grace of God (2 Corinthians 1:2, Lexham English Bible).

Or, as he writes later in the same letter:

But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, *so that Christ's power may reside in me* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The motive for obedience to God's will must come from God, as a gift, and not from human prowess which lacks the proper motive for obedient conduct. This is further confirmed in Paul's affirmation:

It is not that we are competent in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but *our competence is from God* (2 Corinthians 3:5)

Paul explains that the glory of Christ that is reflected in the believer—when the veil of unbelief is lifted from the heart—originates with God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness." However, to avoid any misunderstanding, Paul makes clear that the source of that experience or knowledge is not exceptional scholarship or extraordinary self-discipline or virtue. He says:

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But *we have this treasure in clay jars*, so that it may be made clear that *this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us* (2 Corinthians 4:6–7, NRSV).

In this same regard, Paul explains to the saints at Corinth

that we don't fight spiritual warfare with weapons of our own design—that is, of our own wisdom and strength. Rather the weapons we use have divine power to destroy that which opposes our experience of God. They are the weapons of God's power by which we are enabled to take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.

For the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have *divine power* to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the *knowledge of God*, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

The "armor of God" is God—*his* divine power, *in us*! It is *he* who defeats the enemy *through* us because of our faith in "the strength of his might" or "the might of his strength" (Ephesians 6:10). As Paul says, It is "Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

All Virtue is God's Virtue

Divine love subsumes all Christian virtues, as it cannot be separated from godliness or the character of God himself. In other words, all virtue is derived from God's nature. It is the virtue of Christ himself. All holiness of character is the holiness of God, without which no one will see the Lord. This is reflected in the following considerations:

The Spirit himself is referred to as "the Spirit of holiness" (Romans 1:4) by whom we are sanctified or made holy (Romans 15:16).

In this regard Paul wrote: "It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, *who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption* (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Paul further writes to the Corinthians about "the

holiness and sincerity that are from God" (2 Corinthians 1:12).

He also writes to the Ephesians that the new self was "*created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*" (4:24).

The writer of Hebrews states: Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, *that we may share in his holiness* (12:10).

In summary, the holiness which we must have, if we are to see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14), is that of his Spirit—that is *the holiness that is from God*. It is the holiness of Christ himself which has been assigned to us and into which we are being transformed. God's ultimate goal for the new creation is simply this—that we *share in his holiness*.

In his first epistle, John identifies *light* as *love*—the love that he says was commanded by Christ from the beginning of the gospel (John 13:34; 1 John 2:7; 2 John 1:5). In this same epistle, John uses the terms *light*, *Spirit*, *life*, and *truth* as synonyms of *divine love*. This love, he asserts, is *from God* (4:7). It is the essence of his nature and originates with him. Consequently, the command of Jesus to "love as I have loved" cannot be obeyed unless God enables it— which he has promised to do.

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Romans 5:5).

All True Obedience Is the Work of God In the Believer

In the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul describes the indispensable nature of the divine love of God which has been

poured out into the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit. This, he asserts, is "a more excellent way" than extraordinary spiritual gifts—even the gift of knowledge:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, *but have not love*, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, *but have not love*, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, *but have not love*, I gain nothing.

Any attempt to obey God's will, whether in thought, word, or action, must be predicated upon the presence of divine love if it is to constitute acceptable obedience. All evil, said Jesus, originates as an attitude of heart (Matthew 15:18–20). Unless our response to God's will is prompted by the love of the Spirit, it amounts to nothing. In this regard, Paul wrote to the Galatians:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The *only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love* (Galatians 5:6).

Faith working through divine love—the *only thing that counts*.

Paul exhorts the Ephesians:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and *live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (5:1–2).

In this, Paul not only instructs every believer to live a life of *love*—loving just as Christ loved—he further exhorts that they *live a life of light*:

For you were once darkness, but now you are *light in the Lord*. Live as children of light (for the *fruit of the light*

consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:8–10).

They were once darkness, which he identifies as the source of fruitless deeds, whereas light is the source of "all goodness, righteousness and truth." However, the source of that light is *the Word* who is the *light of life* (John 1:4; 8:12).

8 Divine Love: Expressed As Service of Others

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And *we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.*

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, *how can the love of God be in him?*

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue *but with actions and in truth* (1 John 3:16–18).

To define God's nature would only be possible if the English language had, in addition to the indicative and subjunctive, an *infinitive* mood with which to speak in tenses that are not limited by time or space or any other contingency—expressing being that is ever increasing, but without changing, and without limitation of any kind.

However, for the sake of our human context I commend the following working definition—not original with me—that I have found both helpful and consistent with the apostolic writings:

Divine love is that active and beneficent goodwill which stops at nothing to achieve the good of the beloved object.

The Reactive Nature of Human Love

Human love is *reactive*. It is motivated externally by the properties of its object—something pleasant or beneficial—that prompts or elicits a feeling which is called *love*. Consequently, humans don't speak of loving what they don't like, with the exception, perhaps, of parents and their *own* children.

When an object creates within us a pleasant feeling we commonly describe it with the verb *to like*. Upon reflection, it may easily be seen that the English verb "to like" means essentially to derive pleasure from. To say "I like music" means that music gives me pleasure—which is literally the way it is expressed in Spanish, Italian, and Romanian, as well as in several non-Romance languages.

Whenever the feeling of "liking" someone or something intensifies, we sense the need for a different verb to convey a more intense feeling. So, we say, "I *love* you." Observe, however, that the essential nature of the feeling does not change. It only intensifies. What was pleasing has simply become *more* pleasing. So, the verb "to love," as the verb "to like," continues to be reactive and self-gratifying.

In contrast, John says:

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19).

Furthermore, God did not love us in response to our loving him or *because he perceived something in us* that prompted him to love us. He loved us when we were his enemies (Romans 5:10).

Such love had never before been known to humanity until it was revealed in Jesus:

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, *has made him known* (John 1:18).

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Hebrews 1:3).

The description of Christ as "the radiance of God's glory:" and "the exact representation of his being" could not more clearly equate the nature of the Son with that of the Father. Consequently, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus said to Philip. If, as John says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), Jesus, "who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4), must also be the same divine love as the Father. However, had Jesus not been revealed in human form, we would never have known what divine love looks like. Since no one had ever seen or experienced it (1 Corinthians 2:6–10), it was unimaginable—until it was revealed.

It was necessary that Jesus be recognized to be the Son of God if people were ever to be enabled to *know God* (Hebrews 8:11), as Jeremiah had prophesied (31:34).

To Serve God Is To Serve Others

While in an absolute sense we must ultimately choose between serving self and serving God, we are informed that God "is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything" (Acts 17:25). It seems clear from scripture that we serve God by serving the needs of those whom he has created, with priority given to those of the new creation (Galatians 6:10). In this regard, Jesus said, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

We worship God whenever we place all that we have, including our bodies, at his disposal, to be used in the service of

others (Romans 12:1). Jesus said that true worship is in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Worship in spirit is that of the heart. To worship in truth is to align oneself with the reality of God's nature. To worship in spirit and in truth is to "worship by the Spirit of God" (Philippians 3:3). It is to live by the power of the love of the Spirit.

The idea that God is to be served by serving his spiritual children is echoed by John when he writes:

"For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, *cannot* love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

And to love one's brother, according to John, is to give up self—to lay down one's life—in the service of his brothers (1 John 3:16–17).

Consequently, on a practical level, one must choose either to follow the dictates or purpose of self-will or submit to the will of God which dictates that our purpose in life be that of serving others— in his name and by the power of his love—as if their needs were those of Jesus himself.

As an extension of the above proposition, I suggest further that fallen human nature is self-preferring and self-serving; that *all sin is ultimately selfishness* and contradicts the purpose for which man was created.¹⁰

It is only when God regenerates a penitent believer, assigning to him the righteousness of Christ and sharing with him his own nature or Spirit of love, that the veil is removed from his heart and he is freed from his slavery to self (2 Corinthians 3:16–17). He is then enlightened with "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Through the process of sanctification, by the Holy Spirit,

believers are gradually transformed—from one level of glory to another—into the image of the creator (2 Corinthians 3:18). Since God is love, that process culminates in their being "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

At no point does the above analysis deprecate the need to care for one's own legitimate needs. A righteous man always cares for his basic needs, as did the Lord, in order to preserve himself to be used as an instrument that is fit for the master's use in the service of others. Like a mother who tends to her own basic needs to be able to devote herself fully to the care of her children, the righteous man takes care of himself—not as an end in itself, but because his body is the temple of God who lives in him and who seeks to work through him. In this, God's glory is seen and magnified as it was in the life of Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served, and who did nothing to please himself (Mark 10:45; Romans 15:3).

Paul refers to those who reject God's reality and follow evil, as being "self-seeking" (Romans 2:8). In contrast, the kind of love which is characteristic of God's nature is "*not* self-seeking" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Furthermore, Paul instructs that "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:24). He further informs us that the old man that is being put off is characterized by "deceitful desires," by which it is "being corrupted," Peter attributes the corruption that is in the world to "evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4), which he associates with living in "ignorance" (1 Peter 1:14).

The new self matures as it is renewed in the "*attitude of your minds*" and is "being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" ("knowledge" is used here in an *experiential* sense). In other words, the new self is "created to be like God" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Through the experience of God's presence, the ignorance associated with the evil desires of the old self and its corrupt

nature is dispelled and the truth—which is God's reality, no longer suppressed by the fantasy of unrighteousness—comes into focus.

That it was a preference for others that characterized the life of our Lord, and the preference which is to be characteristic of those of us who believe, seems evident from the following statement of John:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we *ought* to lay down our lives for our brothers (1 John 3:16).

Peter also refers to the fact that in his suffering, Christ left us an example that we should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21).

Compassion That Takes Action

The love which John defines by pointing to the cross is not a reaction to something by which it is pleased. That is the nature of human love. Divine love, in contrast, is a motivating force that cannot ignore human need. It is not only touched with compassion, but moved to take action to meet that need. It is not because of self-satisfaction in helping the needy nor because of any other benefit that divine love is compassionate. It is simply due to the nature of the one with whom that compassion originates.

John clarifies that to see a brother in need and fail to act on his behalf—saying only "you're in our thoughts and prayers!"—is evidence that the love of God is not present in the heart (or that one is not being led by the Spirit in that moment).

To fail to act on behalf of one who is in need is to act out of self-interest, not divine love. In fact, John says that one who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:15) and does not have eternal life in him. To hate one's brother is to fail to be his keeper. In a

similar regard, Jesus made unmistakably clear that to neglect the needs of a brother is to neglect Jesus himself (Matthew 25:45).

Although unbelievers naturally experience compassion and often seek to serve the needs of others, such concern is simply evidence that they were created in the image of their creator—not proof that they are being led by the Spirit of God. Even a mother's love is confined to her *own* children. In contrast, God's love extends to all— even to his enemies. This is something human love cannot do.

9 Divine Love: Evidence of Sonship

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him (1 John 3:1).

The apostle John informs us that evidence of God's divine love in us is evidence that we are his children.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. *Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God* (1 John 4:7)

The active presence of divine love in our hearts assures us that we belong to him who is Truth:

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. *This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence* (1 John 3:18–19).

Through his Spirit, God enables us to set our minds on things above and strengthens our hearts with his power, enabling us to grow in his love until we come to *love as he loves all those whom he loves in the way and to the extent that he loves*

them. In this our kinship with him is rendered unmistakable.

John also tells us that the presence of divine love in our hearts reassures us that we have eternal life:

We know that we have passed from death to life, *because we love each other* (1 John 3:14, NIV, 2011).

He continues:

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. *And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us* (1 John 3:24).

Here John assures us that those who love like Jesus live in God and God lives in them. His presence, John adds, is conveyed to us by his Spirit. This reality is also stated by Paul when he writes:

The Spirit himself confirms to our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

As further evidence that we have eternal life, John makes four parallel statements regarding those who are God's children—who have God's life in them:

Those who *obey his commands* live in him, and he in them. (1 John 3:24a).

If we love one another, *God lives in us* and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12).

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, *God lives in him* and he in God" (1 John 4:15).

Whoever *lives in love* lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16).

While those in whom God lives obey his *commands*—though not perfectly or without sin—John asserts that the *command* of Jesus is that we love:

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, *his command is that you walk in love* (2 John 1:6; 1 John 3:23; 4:21).

To the extent that Christ is in us, directing our hearts into his love (2 Thessalonians 3:5), his presence will be recognized by a desire to live for others—to satisfy their needs as though they were our own. This will not be regarded as a burden but experienced as a welcomed privileged.

Faith, repentance, and baptism give us the assurance that *we are in Christ*. Having God express his love through us—by his Spirit—assures us that *Christ is in us*. His divine love in our hearts confirms that we are his children.

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34–35).

It is not an insignificant fact that the people of God are to be recognized by their resemblance to his character—to his infinite love, not to his infinite knowledge and understanding, for which we are unequipped.

10 Divine Love: The True Measure of Spiritual Growth

That spiritual growth consists of *an increase in the rule of divine love in the heart* of the believer may be seen clearly in the following statements of Paul.

To the Colossians he writes that it is from the head that "the whole body . . . grows as God causes it to grow"

(2:16).

To the Ephesians he writes: "From him [Christ] the whole body *grows and build itself up in love*" (4:19).

He also relates love and growth in his prayer for the Philippians: "that your *love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight*" (1:9).

Paul states that spiritual growth *comes from God*. It is a gift, not the result of human effort. The reason for this is that the love which is the substance of spiritual growth is the divine love of God's own nature. Consequently, for the body to grow in divine love, that growth must be *caused* by God himself, which is what occurs when he pours out his love into the hearts of his children.

One of the practical effects of spiritual growth in divine love is an increase in knowledge and depth of insight. These do not come from formal training. They simply come as a result of growth in divine love (Philippians 1:9).

Whenever spiritual growth occurs, there is a transformative increase in the influence of divine love in the heart. Consistent with this are the words of Paul to the Galatians:

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth *until Christ is formed in you*, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (4:19).

For Christ to be formed in us is for him to grow up within us, which is another way of saying that his love fills us to the measure of the fullness of God.

Elsewhere Paul uses a different imagery to refer to the same reality. Rather than Christ being *formed in you*, he refers to the fact that we *grow up into Christ*:

But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things *grow up into Christ*, who is the head. From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. *As each one does its part, the body builds itself up in love* (Ephesians 4:15–16, New English Translation).

Since spiritual growth has as its objective to fill one with the Spirit of Christ, growth in divine love—the love of the Spirit—is seen to be the practical measure of spiritual growth. The practical effect of that growth will be an increase in our genuine concern and commitment to serving the needs of others, especially those of the members of the household of faith.

Summary

Paul describes growth in the body of Christ as Christ being formed within the believer. This occurs as divine love increases its dominance over the heart. Divine love is conveyed to the heart through the medium of the Holy Spirit whom God causes to dwell in the believer. The presence of the Spirit in the body of Christ results in its being built up *as God causes it to grow*. The substance of that growth is the love of God himself. That growth ultimately culminates in God being *all in all*—the body being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Paul writes to the Philippians that his objective for every believer is "that we may present everyone fully *mature in Christ*" (Philippians 1:28).

In his epistle to the Ephesians, he defines *maturity* as attaining "to the whole measure of the *fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:13).

Maturity comes as a result of experiencing the fullness of that *unknowable* love of Christ. By being "rooted and grounded" in that love, we are enabled to grasp its dimensions. This comes as the effect of Christ taking up his residence in our hearts by faith (Ephesians

3:19).

Because of our faith, God strengthens us in our inner being with his power—the power of his own presence—the power of his divine love, poured into our hearts by the Spirit who lives in us (Ephesians 3:16; Romans 5:5; 2 Timothy 1:14).

An increase in knowledge and understanding of the scriptures can hardly be the equivalent of spiritual growth, as this would put the majority of believers throughout history at a disadvantage due to their illiteracy and the lack of access to a copy of the scriptures.

While the scriptures reveal God's will for his new creation, they do not point to a book, but to Jesus who said:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:39).

Eternal life is a gift. Once received, nothing else is necessary than to allow that life to transform us into the very image of God.

The scriptures not only provide a description of what we are being transformed into, they also tell us about how we are to protect this *treasure in earthen vessels* by remaining firm in our faith or confidence in the promise and power of God to keep us from falling. They also inform us of our need to keep our eyes on the cross of which we are reminded as we share the Lord's Supper and when we meditate on God's will day and night.

The scriptures also teach us to pray continually for our brothers and for others. They tell us that we were created for the purpose of being used by God to execute the good works he prepared for us to do well in advance of our lifetime (Ephesians 2:10).

Such an understanding of scripture does not require extensive or formal training. These concepts appear repeatedly in the gospels and throughout the content of the apostolic letters. They can be understood by all upon hearing them. They have to do with godly conduct, not with doctrinal deductions or propositional postulates that require training unavailable to most people. We are called to share in the holiness of God, not in the content of what he knows. That is why the only thing that matters is faith working through divine love. In this God is seen, and his nature is glorified.

Spiritual growth is not growth in our knowledge of the Bible—although such familiarity can encourage us in our faith and enlighten our understanding of what the Spirit is doing within us. All who seek to understand the will of the Father will have a desire to become familiar with what he has revealed in scripture—to the extent of their ability and opportunity. However, growth is a function of the extent to which the love of God enables us to renounce a self-serving purpose for our lives and devote ourselves to his purpose—that of glorifying him by allowing his nature to be seen in us. We do this when—by the strength of his divine love—we lay down our lives in the service of others, as Christ did for us (1 John 3:16).

The more we *love* like God, the more we *look* like God. To that end, we are being transformed into his image "by the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). *This is spiritual growth.* There is no other. For the body to grow in *his* likeness, it must grow in *his* divine love—as he causes it to grow.

The meaning of Jesus's command, "love one another as I have loved you" should no longer be misunderstood. To obey his command is *to love with Jesus's love all whom he loved, in the way and to the extent that he loved them—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—in every thought, word, and deed.* This means giving up our lives to become slaves (δοῦλος) in the service of one another—taking up our cross daily, offering our

bodies as living sacrifices—with no other purpose for our lives than to trust and obey him who called us from darkness into his marvelous light to share his very nature and glory.

"And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us (1 John 3:23).

May the Lord empower us to do his will here on earth, from the heart, as it is done in heaven.

⇐ CAN WE BE WRONG ⇒ ABOUT ANYTHING?

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14. Conclusion

As a child growing up in Churches of Christ, I had the clear impression that we were the only true church and the only Christians. I also had the impression that members of all other churches shared the same fate as atheists and infidels—lost and condemned to hell. They were not to be called "Christians" except in an accommodated sense.

Long before I was able to evaluate scripture independently as an adult, it seemed clear to me that what set us apart from all the other churches was the fact that we were right about everything while others were wrong.¹¹ Our assumption was that one could never be wrong *about anything* and still be right with God.

John wrote, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Since it was assumed (1) that the "doctrine of Christ" included everything Christ had ever taught or authorized to be taught and (2) that to misunderstand the teaching of scripture resulted in separation from God, there was clearly no room for misunderstanding. It was imperative that we be right or be lost!

The Dilemma Explained

The idea that doctrinal deductions determine whether one is a faithful Christian gave rise to the controversy in the 1960s among Churches of Christ over what was generally referred to as "institutionalism." Given the philosophy of interpretation dominant among those churches at that time, there was little alternative but to divide. Since we believed that a misunderstanding of scripture would result in our being separated from God, we had no choice but to accept our own deductions and reject from our number those who did not.

But we were mistaken, on at least two counts.

First, we were mistaken in our belief that sincerely misunderstanding scripture separates us from God. Secondly, we were mistaken in our belief that our interpretations of scripture are always without mistake.

I recall the day I discovered my inability to recognize imperfections in my understanding of propositional truth. That

discovery came at a time when I found out that some of my previously held convictions were mistaken. That experience made clear to me that I could never again have certainty that my thinking was without error.

That didn't mean that I could never achieve an understanding that was functionally accurate and useful. It simply meant I could no longer expect to be error-free or exhaustive in my understanding. To do so would require that I comprehend how each proposition relates to all other propositions in the universe—something of which only God is capable.

My inability to perfectly understand all that God meant by what he said in scripture was a shocking discovery. It seemed unavoidable that if a right standing with God were based on being absolutely right about everything, then it would be impossible for me to ever maintain a right relationship with God—on that basis.

At about that same time, I was becoming increasingly sensitive to the fact that members of our Churches of Christ—who claimed to be right about everything—were not all obeying what God said in scripture, at least not what I understood him to say. For example, when the apostle Paul instructed women to cover their heads when praying (1 Corinthians 11:1–16), it seemed to me that they should obey his instruction. My understanding of Paul's instruction found support in the writings of David Lipscomb, a leader within Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century.

It concerned me that women who failed to cover their heads in prayer were blatantly disobeying a direct command from God, but we as a church were not taking action to discipline them—though we had withdrawn from others because of their unscriptural teaching and practices. So I began to wonder, *Why shouldn't we withdraw from those who persist in*

disobeying this doctrine as well?

My search for an answer to the question, *from whom should we withdraw*, led me to the home of one of the most influential and venerated preachers within Churches of Christ in the Deep South at that time. I clearly recall sitting in his living room in northwest Alabama, listening carefully as he responded to the question I had raised about fellowship, withdrawal, and the head covering. I was deeply perplexed by his answer:

"You see," he explained, "there are some things in scripture that are clearer than others. When things are not clear, we must make allowances for our differences."

As I understood him, the answer to my question was simply *clarity*. In other words, we only hold each other accountable for those things in scripture which are *clear*!

Even now, I recall the profound disappointment that overcame me as I sat respectfully and silently, asking myself the obvious and deeply disturbing question which his response evoked: *Clear to whom?!?*

Clear to whom? Clear only to those who are sincere? (Was not David Lipscomb sincere?) Clear to me and not to you? Clear to you and not to me? And who would decide? Who was authorized to determine who was to decide? Was I to determine clarity for everyone else? Was I to allow someone else to determine clarity for me? Was that which was unclear to me to become suddenly clear simply by someone else declaring it so?

In this regard I could find no acceptable alternative—I unquestionably had to decide for myself, according to the light available to me. But what about others? Were they also to decide for themselves, even when we differed? Or were they to listen to me?

I could no longer say they should simply listen to the Bible.

That was precisely what we were all doing! We were listening to the Bible but we were not all understanding it alike. Some things were clearer to me than they were to others, just as some things were clearer to them than to me.

To compound the difficulty of the above dilemma, our movement's twentieth-century claim to unity on the basis of doctrinal uniformity rested on the premise that seeing the Bible alike was not only possible, it was thought to be the guaranteed outcome of people examining the biblical text without preconceived notions as to its meaning.

Assuming we all followed this approach to the interpretation of scripture, how were we to account for our doctrinal differences?

Historically our answer was simplistic: those who disagreed with us were simply dishonest or insincere. Why else, we reasoned, could they not understand clear statements in scripture as we did? Would not all who have a genuine commitment to speak where the Bible speaks and remain silent where it is silent agree in their conclusions as to what the Bible *means* by what it *says*?

As I continued to reflect on the implications of clarity in a context of unity based on doctrinal agreement, it soon became obvious that we were *not* all teaching the same things. Yet not all of our differences resulted in division! For example, we still regarded others as "faithful" even when they didn't agree with David Lipscomb on the question of carnal warfare or the head covering.

On the other hand, there were some whose differences couldn't be tolerated: these were those who didn't seem to take God seriously, as we saw it, and went "beyond what was written" (e.g., supporting Bible colleges and other institutions through which to do the work of the church). They referred to

us as "antis" because *we rejected what they accepted*. We called them "liberals," because *they accepted what we rejected*. So we *withdrew* from them. These were things that seemed *clear to us, but not to them*.

On the other hand, there were those who took our differences to an "extreme," as we characterized it. They said *we* had gone beyond what was written (e.g., conducting Sunday Schools and drinking from multiple cups at the Lord's table). They regarded us as "liberals" because *we approved of what they rejected*. We regarded them as "antis" because *they rejected what we approved, and they withdrew from us*.

In their view, we were imperfect in our behavior and doctrinal understanding. But these, you see, were matters which were *clear to them, but not to us*. However, they didn't agree among themselves about everything—as in matters such as the head covering, carnal warfare, and others—nor did we. In reality, the lists of those doctrines required for fellowship and unity were not uniform—they varied from one group to the next.

Ultimately, the system of *fellowship with God and with each other based on clarity of understanding is inherently divisive*. It *guarantees that division will occur every time someone learns something new in scripture*.

Knowledge That Can't Be Known

At about the time I was discovering the inconsistencies in how some doctrines were required for fellowship while others were not, I began to notice numerous references in scripture to *knowing God or knowledge of God* where these words did not appear to be used in the cognitive or intellectual sense of knowing—as in doctrinal knowledge.

My attention was drawn particularly to Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in which he refers to a "knowledge" which is

beyond knowing or which surpasses knowledge—a knowledge that enables one to be filled with and experience the very "fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).

Over time I began to understand that the knowledge which God wants to share with us is not information *about* himself but knowledge *of* himself—a knowledge that comes from *experiencing* his presence within.

The experience of knowing God is foretold in prophecy concerning those who were to be under new covenant: "I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33; also Hebrews 8:10; 10:16). It is evident, from the verse that follows, that this statement was *not* simply a metaphorical way of saying, I will write my laws in a new book (the New Testament) which they will all read and understand alike—the youngest to the oldest.

Jeremiah continues:

"No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

The old covenant—unlike the new—was first written in a book and then *taught* to the people, as in the days of Ezra when, it is said of the Levites:

They read from the Book of the Law of God, *making it clear and giving the meaning* so that the people understood what was being read."

Under the old covenant, knowledge about God and his will had to be *taught* by those qualified to interpret it correctly. Under the new covenant, knowledge of God is *experienced* directly, without teachers or interpreters. This is because the law or God's nature is written upon the tablet of the human heart by God's own presence, through his Spirit. Consequently, John

writes:

"But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and *all of you know the truth*. . . . As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him" (1 John 2:20, 27).

That doesn't mean that John's letter to them was of no value as words inspired by the Holy Spirit. It simply means that God's nature, his life, is not confined to the content of a book. John's letter is one of the clearest statements in scripture of who God is and how he shares himself with those who put their faith in the obedience of his son. But the content of John's letter is *not* eternal life, nor is it eternal life to *know* John's letter. Eternal life, John says, is to "know him who is true" (5:2).

The law of God is simply a reflection of his moral character. When his moral character (love) is written on the human heart, the law of God—his divine nature—is experienced there.

So, when Paul says "the love of God is poured out into our hearts by the Spirit whom he has given us," he is referring to the same reality to which Jeremiah referred when he said of God, "I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts."

John begins his gospel with reference to Jesus by saying, "In him was life" (1:4). He later quotes Jesus as saying, "I have come that they may have life" (10:10). When it is understood that Paul's reference to the "mystery" of all times—"the word of God in its fullness"—is the equivalent of "Christ *in* you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:25–27), it becomes evident that what God desires to give us is *not* a new *law*, but new *life*—his *own* life. This is the same life which was "from the beginning," which John says was the "light" of men (John 1:4). Thus, God's

law is experienced in the heart, or source of conscious purpose or motivation—not learned by memorization.

It was to this life that Jesus appears to refer when he said: "you shall *know* the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). The *truth* referred to here is recognized by the manner in which it was to set one free, as seen in the verses that follow.

Those to whom Jesus spoke retorted that they were *not slaves*. To this Jesus observed that "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (v. 34). The freedom to which Jesus referred was not from the *guilt* of sin but from its *power*. Consequently, the *truth* that frees from the power of sin is the life that Jesus gives—the experience of that source of motive or purpose which is the opposite of sin—and which is more powerful than sin. This is not intellectual power but spiritual power—the power of the Spirit. It isn't doctrinal knowledge *about* sin, but the *power* to overcome it.

Jesus said:

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

John wrote:

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is *greater than the one who is in the world* (1 John 4:4)

In contrast to law—which came through Moses—grace, peace, life, and godliness all come to us by divine power—through the *knowledge of God*. This is the result of our having become partakers or sharers in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:2-4)—received as an unearned gift, not payment for services rendered.

Jesus speaks of himself as being the truth and the life. And it is to the Spirit of Jesus that John refers when he speaks of "the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever" (2 John 2). To *know* the truth, as John uses the word, is to know it experientially. It is to intimately "*know* him who is true" and who "is eternal life" (1 John 5:20; see also John 17:3). This comes about through a union of Spirit with spirit, as Paul explains: "He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him" (1 Corinthians 6:17).

The above considerations reveal that God's primary objective in everything he has said and done is that we participate or share in his divine nature, since it is his nature—true life or authentic reality—that sets one free.

As in the first creation God fashioned man in his own image, in the new creation we all bear the image of Christ. Our being transformed into his likeness enables us to reflect his glory, and God is enabled to become *all in all*—which is the ultimate purpose of his will.

The Issues at Stake

For those whose outlook has been shaped by the tradition of Churches of Christ, the relationship of correct doctrinal understanding to one's relationship with God is of vital concern. The same may also be true of those whose church traditions are similar.

The question posed in the title of this book reflects numerous issues which I have honestly attempted to address in the light of my present understanding of scripture. I hope my conclusions help you to better understand God's will for your life.

1. Is a perfect understanding of scripture possible?

No, not by anyone other than God. This is evident both from experience and scripture.

Perfect knowledge and perfect understanding remain outside the realm of human possibilities. To know perfectly is to know exhaustively, which requires that we relate what we know to all that may be known, which is not possible for humans.

While it would be an absurdity to maintain that the Bible cannot be understood, given the fact of who wrote it. But the Bible itself makes clear that not all people are able immediately to understand everything it says upon reading it. The Law of Moses had to be interpreted by the priestly class, and the writings of Paul contain certain statements that are certified to be difficult to understand.

Below are a few excerpts from scripture that support what I am saying:

They read from the Book of the Law of God, *making it clear and giving the meaning* so that the people understood what was being read (Nehemiah 8:8).

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, *for you were not ready* for it. And even now you are not yet ready (1 Corinthians 3:1–2).

The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know *as he ought to know* (1 Corinthians 8:2).

We know *in part*" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

His letters [Paul's] contain some things that are *hard to understand*, which ignorant and unstable people *distort*, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own

destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

I am speaking in *human terms*, because of your *natural limitations* (Romans 6:19).

I still have many things to say to you, but *you cannot bear them now* (John 16:12).

About this we have much to say, and it is *hard to explain*, since you have become *dull of hearing*. . . . For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child (Hebrews 5:11–13).

Statements such as the above underscore the variability of people to understand human discourse at any given stages of intellectual and spiritual growth.

Given the limitations of the human intellect, understanding of propositional truth (unlike the belief of facts) must always be approximate—never absolute. The fact that our knowledge is incomplete, however, doesn't prevent it from being accurate or sufficient—otherwise I would have no reasonable expectation that you would understand anything I am writing. But communication is always less than perfect.

The reader will never understand precisely the thoughts that are in my mind as I write, nor will any of us ever understand, as God does, the thoughts he translated to the pages of scripture.

However, just as our limited understanding of physical science does not prevent us from making advances in that field, our inability to understand the scriptures perfectly does not prevent us from having an understanding which is sufficient to accomplish the purpose for which they were written.

Being imperfect in understanding does not prevent functional accuracy of knowledge. It merely precludes its being exhaustive or complete. Furthermore, and more importantly,

being imperfect in knowledge does not prevent one from having an obedient heart. An error of understanding does not imply a wrongful intention.

To deny the possibility of perfect knowledge is not to deny the existence of absolute truth. It is merely to deny that humans can know propositional truths absolutely. In other words, there will always be more to know about any given proposition than any human will ever comprehend. And given that limitation, we can never be certain that what we do know is complete. But we can know for certain that "the man who loves God is *known* by God" (1 Corinthians 8:3).

2. If perfect understanding of scripture is not possible, how can our relationship with God be based on correct doctrine?

It can't be; and it isn't. Nothing more is required to *remain* in fellowship with God than was required to *enter* into fellowship with him. In other words, *nothing more is required for fellowship than is required for sonship*. But neither perfection of behavior nor of doctrinal understanding is required for sonship.

The idea that God requires perfect understanding of the Bible—of the new covenant scriptures in particular—is based on numerous unwarranted assumptions about statements in scripture:

a. It has been said that "walking in the light" requires that we understand as God does everything he has said in scripture, whereas John tells us that to walk in light is to walk in love (1 John 1:5; 2:10; 4:16).

b. We have been told that going "beyond that which is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6) refers to our failure to understand and obey everything God has said in scripture.

In any event, if "that which is written" refers to scripture, it would be limited to the Old Testament scriptures—since those of the new covenant were yet to be completed—or to what he has said earlier in this letter.

Since it would go without saying that to regulate one's behavior by God's revelation was not a concept that would have been foreign to the Corinthian disciples, the focus of Paul's admonition was the specific principle that was being violated in pitting leader against leader in terms of importance in the church.

Since the text says, "Then you will not be puffed," as a result of abiding within "what is written," it seems clear that Paul is referring to a specific rule of Old Testament scripture that would prevent their being puffed up—either as leaders or as followers of a clique. To that end, he seems to quote fragments from the old covenant scriptures of Isaiah 29:14; Job 5:13; and Psalm 94:11, in which we are told that:

The wisdom of the wise will perish.

The schemes of the wily are swept away.

The wisdom of the wise will perish.

Furthermore, the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God (1 Corinthians 3:19). Consequently, he is the only one who is worthy to be followed. Paul and Apollos are nothing but servants. How much less important should those be regarded who are leading a schismatic group? If the motive of heart in these divisions were examined, it would be discovered that division is an act of the flesh, selfish in every respect—contrary to the divine love of God of which Paul can scarcely speak to brothers who are not spiritual. A church can't be spiritual that is divided.

That we are to follow scripture is beyond controversy, so

far as I am concerned. But to refrain from going beyond "what is written" cannot be regarded as a requirement that we have complete and simultaneous comprehension of all that God meant by everything he has said in scripture.

c. We have been taught that "sound doctrine" includes *everything* revealed in the New Testament scriptures, whereas the term never has that meaning in scripture. In 1 Timothy 1:10 the term has reference to that which is contrary to law or God's nature (the gospel of his glory). In 1 Timothy it refers to doctrine which is not "false" (6:3), which does not come from conceit but from a pure heart (1:3-5)—with no hidden agenda. In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul has reference to doctrine which does not arise out of a self-serving interest. In Titus 1:9 he is referring to doctrine which does not spring from dishonest motives, and in Titus 2:1 he refers to teaching or conduct that conforms to the "trustworthy message" of the *gospel*. However, this does not include everything taught in the writings of the New Testament.

d. It has been said that abiding in "the doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9) means to understand and obey perfectly every doctrine found in the New Testament. However, John has reference to the doctrine *about* Christ—that he has come in the *flesh*—not everything that Christ and his apostles ever taught.

If John was referring to a perfect understanding of everything contained in the New Testament scriptures (which had not yet been completed or even recognized as scripture), then none could be saved. As noted earlier, some of the "things" that Paul wrote, which are "difficult to understand," are things that novices, the illiterate, the slow of learning, those of meager formal education may not yet understand—things which some may never understand whose lifetimes are not sufficiently long.

Furthermore, who can know with any certainty what practice Paul is referring to when he speaks of "those who are baptized for the dead"? Who can tell for sure what the

**"abomination of desolation" has reference to in Matthew 24:15?
Who can positively identify the 144,000 of Revelation 7?**

People who argue that "the doctrine of Christ" refers to everything Jesus ever said or authorized to be written, do not believe it includes any of the things just mentioned nor the symbolism of the book of Revelation. Rather, they limit "the doctrine of Christ" to those doctrines which *they* have determined to be *more important* than others. These doctrines make up *their* list of essential or non-negotiable doctrines—doctrines which they require others to believe in order to remain in *their* fellowship. Note well that they do *not* make a condition of fellowship out of *every* doctrine taught by Christ or his apostles—*only* those that seem to be important—to *them*!

e. It has also been asserted that Paul's instruction regarding "the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17) includes everything written in the New Testament, whereas the context shows that he is referring *specifically* to those who "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned."

It is the "divisions" and "obstacles" which are contrary to the teaching. The "teaching" he is referring to is that instruction which the Romans had received about accepting one another without quarreling over differences of understanding (Romans 14:1-15:1-7). The scriptures related to the new covenant had not yet been completed. There was still much that had not yet been taught because the occasion for the teaching had not yet arisen. And it would be centuries before any individual would own a complete copy of all the writings that comprise the New Testament canon of scripture. To divide over doctrine on the basis of Romans 16:17 is to engage in the very thing it prohibits!

The terms *false doctrine* and *false teacher* *always* refer ultimately to the *deceitful intentions of the teacher*. Our being "of the same mind" has reference with our attitude toward one

another (Romans 12:16)—that we all have the same concern and preference for each other (Philippians 2:2–5). Each is to please his neighbor and not himself, following the example of Christ (Romans 15:1–3).

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about God's design of the community of faith, he specifies that there was to be "no division in the body." He then explains that this was not to be accomplished by their agreement as to the meaning of scripture, but *"that the members would have the same concern for each other"* (1 Corinthians 12:25).

3. If our standing right with God is not based on being right about everything, upon what is it based?

Standing right with God can only be based on living faith—a committed reliance upon Jesus. Our confidence is not in our ability to know enough or be good enough, but in the perfect doing and dying of Jesus on our behalf. It is Jesus who was right about everything so that we don't have to be.

The death of Christ was accepted as sufficient payment for all our sins—past, present, and future. Through his flawless obedience, the "righteous requirements of the law" have been *"fully met in us"* (Romans 8:4). Consequently, *he* has been made *our* righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). This is precisely why David could speak of the man *to whom God would not impute sin* (Psalm 32:2; Romans 4:8). He is talking about *us* who believe!

In no sense, however, was Paul implying that believers have no sin in their lives. John makes it clear that we are all guilty of sin—including those whose sin is lying about having no sin (1 John 1:8-10). However, so long as that sin is not one of rebellion, they remain "hidden with Christ in God."

In contrasting the annual sacrifice of the Levitical system

with the sacrifice of Christ, the writer of Hebrews observes that the repetitive nature of the Levitical sacrifice was evidence of their inability to secure perfection. Otherwise, he says, those on whose behalf they were offered "would have been cleansed *once for all*, and would *no longer have felt guilty for their sins*" (Hebrews 10:2).

In contrast with the Levitical sacrifice, it is said of Christ: "By one sacrifice he has made perfect *forever* those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14). In other words, what the Levitical sacrifices *could not do*, the sacrifice of Christ *has done*. Christians—those who are genuine in their trust in the work of Jesus on the cross—have *been cleansed once for all, forever, and should no longer feel guilty for their sins*.

Since the hearts of believers have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to "cleanse us from a guilty conscience," we are free to "draw near to God with a sincere [though never sinless] heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22). That assurance comes not from perfect conduct or understanding, but from an awareness that Jesus has secured our continued standing with God—something we were incapable of doing.

When the crowd of followers asked Jesus on one occasion, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" he replied, "The *work of God* is this: *to believe in the one he has sent*" (John 6:28, 29). To do "the work of God," is not something humans can do, since it requires perfection of motive and of execution. Consequently, it can only be *done* by entrusting ourselves to him who was able to do what we were powerless to do for ourselves. It was in the context of the human dilemma—desiring to do the will of God but not having the ability to do it—that the writer of Hebrews recalls the words of Psalm 40:7, 8 and applies them to Jesus:

Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my

God; your law is within my heart (Psalm 40:7–8).

To do "the work of God" requires a perfect heart upon which the law of God or God's will has been written. It was because humankind was found unable to do *the work of God* that it was necessary that God prepare a human body for Jesus in to demonstrate what it means to *fulfill God's law* and *to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect*.

Simply put, to do the work of God requires perfection, for which Jesus alone was qualified. For this reason, Jesus instructed his audience to find their assurance and hope in *the one whom God has sent*. Or, as David said earlier in Psalm 40:4:

**Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray
after a lie!**

Our faith does not consist in what *we* have done in response to God's commands—which is the kind of faith the Pharisees had—but in what Jesus has done: "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God."

While "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," what we hear *is not faith*. What we hear *enables faith*. It provides a rational basis for believing that Jesus was who he said he was and that he did what the witness of scripture says he did on our behalf.

It is not because we "obeyed the gospel" that we are saved. We obey the gospel because we put our complete trust in Jesus who has secured our salvation. Our obedience was simply a demonstration of our faith in what Jesus did!

***He is the source of your life* in Christ Jesus, whom God made *our* wisdom, *our* righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord' (1 Corinthians**

1:30, RSV).

Paul later observes:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Our boasting, say David and Paul, is in what Jesus has done on our behalf, not in our efforts to obey his commands. Unlike our obedience, what he did was perfect. That's what made it acceptable to God.

Through Jeremiah God spoke of a day when he would make a new covenant with Israel and Judah that would be different from the old one (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-10). The covenants are different in two respects:

First, the new covenant is mediated by Christ and is built on better promises (Hebrews 10:6), one of which is "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more" (Hebrews 10:17).

Secondly, under the new covenant God's law, which is fulfilled by love, is not written in a book! which has to be learned and which is subject to interpretation by people of different levels of intellectual acuity. Rather, he has poured out his love (by which the law, God's will, is fulfilled) into our hearts through his own Spirit, "who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5). It is into his image that we are being transformed so that we reflect his glory—glory "which comes from the Lord, *who is the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Rather than having a law book in our hands, we have the Spirit of the lawgiver living in our hearts, leading us into righteous behavior—enabling us to have deeper, ever-increasing spiritual insight and understanding—by replacing our natural

motivation of self-service with one of divine love. The leadings of the Spirit, however, are *always consistent with scripture*. But they are not all specified in scripture. Often they are, as we used to sing, "beyond the sacred page," but never contrary to its content.

In the final analysis, all right behavior—what one does, says, and thinks—must be motivated by divine love. So when one has the divine love of God within, he has access to that purpose or motive which renders behavior "good" in the eyes of him who is love.

If a law were to be written that could defined right behavior under every human circumstance imaginable, no one would live long enough to read it. Furthermore, right behavior without the right purpose of heart is not right before God, nor does it constitute obedience.

To enable us to do the good works which were prepared in advance for us to do—for which we were created—God has put the right motive in our hearts by giving us his Spirit. To the extent that the Spirit motivates our behavior—as he did the behavior of Jesus—such behavior is right before God. And it identifies us as being kin to Jesus.

4. If our relationship with God is based solely on our faith in the perfect obedience of Christ, then, what about baptism?

While baptism should logically follow faith and repentance (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16), it is not a pardon-procuring action on our part. Rather, it serves to demonstrate the viability of our faith. Baptism doesn't obligate God to pardon sin. It simply verifies what God already knows, as in the case of Abraham when God interrupted his act of obedience. Cornelius received the baptism of the Holy Spirit prior to being baptized in water (Acts 10:44–47).

Some years ago, my business partner and I were in a meeting with the president of one of the largest Bible publishers in the world, surrounded by his cadre of top-level vice-presidents. In the small talk that followed our business meeting, I acknowledged, when asked, that I had a background in Churches of Christ. The company president, who had recently been in conversations with a prominent Church of Christ preacher, had a question for me: "Do you believe a person must be baptized in order to be saved?"

I could see from the look on the face of my business partner—a former Southern Baptist—that he assumed our business efforts were about to be frustrated by my response to a controversial question about religion.

Nevertheless, I replied:

In order to be saved, I believe a person must obey what he understands God's will to be. Willfully refusing to obey a command of God constitutes rebellion against him, and I don't believe one can go to heaven if he is in open rebellion against God. If God commands that we be baptized, then the only acceptable response, it seems to me, is to do what he says.

Salvation is ultimately conditioned upon the belief of facts based upon the testimony of unimpeachable witnesses and conduct in keeping with those facts. It cannot rest upon the imperfect assumptions or interpretations of fallible humans as to what God meant by what he said in scripture!

That repentance and baptism are commanded seems unmistakable to me. It also seems clear that baptism, as far as God is concerned, marks a point in time when the sinner is assured that his sins have been remitted. If, in fact, God has forgiven him prior to baptism, there is no reason to believe he will change his mind just because the believer thought otherwise.

Alexander Campbell was once asked by a sister from Lunenburg, Virginia: "Does the name of Christ, or Christian, belong to any but those who believe the *gospel*, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?"

For those who are indebted to Campbell for their church tradition, his response to the Lunenburg Letter may be shocking, but it cannot responsibly be ignored. It provides special insight into Campbell's thinking on the relationship of baptism to salvation.

In response to implied accusations regarding his views, Campbell was quick to point out that if there were no Christians (saved individuals) in the sects, their effort to unite all of the Christians in the sects would have been misguided.¹²

To be acquitted or declared perfect as an act of God's grace is to receive the "righteousness which comes *from* God" (Romans 1:18) or "the righteousness that comes by faith" (Romans 4:13). This right standing, according to Paul, is simply *credited* to the believer (Romans 4:24).

The perfection ascribed or imputed to us is not an *achieved* righteousness. It cannot be transacted through the act of baptism. Rather, baptism simply validates—to our own conscience—that our faith in God is living or active—as is true of *all* acts of obedience to the will of God as we understand it. It acknowledges that what is *credited* or assigned to us is the perfection of Christ, not one which we have *achieved* through our attempts to obey any or all of God's commands. Consequently, baptism is not a work of righteousness. It is a passive submission or surrender on the part of one who is deceased, so far as self is concerned.

The idea of an "imputed righteousness" is seen by many as an attempt to avoid the need for obedience to all of God's commands. Yet such a motive is only conceived in the mind of

those who believe they must become righteous by their own acts of obedience—as if such acts could always be perfectly executed from a perfect motive.

If you share that point of view, please consider this: If our unrighteousness was imputed to Jesus (Galatians 3:13), why is it not reasonable to conclude that his righteousness has been imputed to those who put their confidence in him?—especially when that is what the scriptures say (Romans 4:3–8; Romans 5:17–19; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:8–9)

The question is often asked, "What about those who have genuine faith but sincerely misunderstand something about baptism?"

We might first observe that if the *desire* to sin results in God imputing guilt, even when the act is never carried out (Matthew 5:28), may he not also have regard for the heart of one who sincerely *desires* to be obedient but obeys a command incorrect due to an honest, unwillful misunderstanding?

Will God have regard for the intentions of the heart *only* when they are evil? Is it with the perfection of execution that God is concerned? (Is he really concerned about unimmersed toes or floating locks of hair?) What is the implication of scripture in this regard?

Paul says: "For if the *willingness* is there, the gift is *acceptable* according to what one has, not according to what he does not have" (2 Corinthians 8:12). Does this not imply something of the distinction God makes between the intent of the heart and one's impaired ability to execute the heart's desire? Does God really require a blind man to see or a lame man to walk?

It isn't necessary to understand perfectly the relationship of baptism to salvation for one to be saved. Perfection of understanding or execution is not a human possibility. One need

not understand the purpose of baptism perfectly for his attitude of heart to be obedient to God. Otherwise, no human response to a command of God would ever be acceptable. Furthermore, not all of the details included in the design of baptism were disclosed on the day of Pentecost—evidence that baptism may be acceptable without complete knowledge of its benefits or design.

Who knows for certain whether forgiveness occurs the instant one is completely immersed, or precisely at the lowest point of submersion—or at the point the body begins its ascension to the surface of the water. Is the immerser raising the body of a dead, penitent sinner or the body of one who has been given "newness of life" prior to being raised to the water's surface? Or does forgiveness come at the moment the first part of the body emerges from beneath the water, or only after the body has been raised to an upright position? Is new life given only after the body comes completely out of the water—as it ascends the steps of the baptism—*and is entirely raised from the watery grave of baptism?*

It must be asked, then, just how much must we understand about baptism and the design of God before our baptism is accepted by God as obedience to the command? *Where* do the scriptures make that distinction? "For the remission of sins" is not pronounced by Peter as a requirement but as a *benefit*—of both repentance and baptism. No one has ever been asked to repeat his repentance because he failed to repent "for the remission of sins."

Remission of sins is no more a requirement than an understanding of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit—who, to this day, is regarded by some as a retired author, not a living presence within the believer.

Does the reception of the gift depend on the recipient's comprehension of the motive of the giver? No one on the day of Pentecost was required to know what was yet to be revealed

about baptism by other writers of the new covenant scriptures. No one understood what the "gift of the Holy Spirit" meant, in spite of the fact that it bears the same relationship to Baptism as the "remission of sins." Would God have withheld the promised blessing because the recipients failed to know enough about it or its benefits?

May one receive remission without receiving the Holy Spirit? May one receive the Holy Spirit without understanding the design of the gift? May he receive the gift without understanding who or what the Spirit is? Is that understanding part of the design of baptism, since the gift, like remission, was one of its benefits? Why must one understand more about the *design* of baptism than he must know about the *function* of the Holy Spirit, if both are benefits accruing to those who are baptized?

It is significant that no pre-baptismal qualifying exam was required before candidates were admitted to baptism.

In the 1921 publication, *Queries and Answers*, David Lipscomb, a leader in nineteenth-century Restoration churches, responded to a query under the heading "Baptism, Because of Remission:"

Brother Lipscomb: Is baptism for the remission of sins to one who has been baptized because of the remission of sins?

I do not think any one was ever baptized because his sins were remitted. They may have believed their sins were remitted before they were baptized, but the remission of sins was not the moving cause. There is nothing in remission of sins as a motive to prompt one to be baptized. They may have thought, inasmuch as God had forgiven their sins, they ought to obey his command to be baptized; but in that case the desire to obey God is the moving cause. *When a man is baptized to obey God, he is led by a proper motive; and I believe when he does this to*

*obey him, God will forgive his sins, whether he knows the act in which God forgives or not. Man cannot be led by a holier or more acceptable motive than the desire to obey God and so 'fulfill all righteousness.' It is a dangerous thing to require more than God requires.*¹³

He who knew the heart of Abraham also knows the heart of all who call upon his name in the humility of simple trusting faith. And that's all he needs to know. On the other hand, we know nothing about the hearts of others. For that reason, we cannot know whether their act of obedience is acceptable to God or not. If one has refused baptism, he has no reasonable expectation of being received into the community of faith. But to judge the acceptability of the obedience of others is to put at risk our own eternal destiny.

5. If we can't be certain that our understanding of scripture is absolutely right, how can we be certain that we are right with God?

It is because we cannot be perfect in our understanding or behavior that the assurance of salvation has been made contingent *only* upon one's belief of the facts of the gospel and a commitment to respond in obedience to all that one understands to be inferred from those facts.

While our obedience is never perfect, nor is it required to be, it assures that our faith is living.

The ability to reason well usually requires intellectual training and development over time and increases only as it is tutored and exercised. But God does not require us to decipher complex propositional statements in scripture as a condition for our being acceptable to him.

That Jesus was the sinless Son of God who died for our sins and that he offers salvation to all who rely on what he did for them can be accepted and trusted to be true by all but infants,

the mentally incapacitated, and those who, with ulterior motives, reject the testimony of unimpeachable witnesses.

It is enough that we accept the *facts* of the gospel, believe them, and obey all that we understand God wants us to do, assured that it is Christ's obedience which is counted to us as perfection, not our own. Our attempts to obey, although *unintentionally* imperfect, validate our faith in *his* perfect obedience by which our imperfect efforts are rendered acceptable to God. What God seeks is an obedient heart which desires to be perfect, without knowing what all righteousness looks like.

In matters of such importance as the salvation of our souls, it is only reasonable to want assurance that we are right. But the scriptures nowhere tell us that our assurance is to be found in *our* being right, whether in doctrinal understanding or in personal conduct. What they do tell us is that our salvation is conditioned on our being right about Jesus. *Sound doctrine* is teaching consistent with the character of Jesus. Our assurance is based on *being right about him* who died for us and who continues to make intercession for us before the one to whom we must ultimately give account.

We were *received* by Jesus on the basis of trust in what he has done for us (faith) and a commitment to do, to the best of our ability, all that we understand he wants us to do (obedience). To *remain* in Jesus requires nothing more.

Proof of sonship, however, does not lie in the possession of some extraordinary gift of the Spirit such as prophecy or speaking in tongues. *Such gifts were never intended to confirm sonship.* This is evident from the fact that (1) the scriptures nowhere promise these gifts to all believers nor do they condition sonship or fellowship upon having such gifts. And (2) such gifts are of no value unless one has the "greater gift" of *love*—which supplies the motive out of which those gifts may be used as

intended by God.

It is the divine love of the Spirit that identifies us as God's children (1 Corinthians 12:31; 13:1-13). Even a donkey can have the gift of tongues (Numbers 22:28), but that doesn't make him a child of God.

Jesus describes our assurance in this way:

Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life (John 4:24, CSB)

Similarly, John wrote:

"We *know* that we have passed from death to life, *because* we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death" (1 John 3:14).

6. If we can't be absolutely right in our thinking, how is it possible for us all to come to a knowledge of the truth?

The term "knowledge of the truth" occurs five times in the new covenant scriptures. In no case does the term refer to doctrinal knowledge. Rather, it has reference to the experience of coming into a saving relationship with the one who is truth (1 Timothy 2:4), an experience which is the result of faith and repentance (2 Timothy 2:25) and which produces godliness of character (Titus 1:1) rather than evil desires (2 Timothy 3:7) or deliberate sin (Hebrews 10:26).

It is to a knowledge of the truth that John refers when speaking of Christ's enabling us to "*know* him who is . . . the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). It is that to which Jesus refers in prayer to his father: "Now this *is* eternal life: that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you

have sent" (John 17:3). Notice that "knowledge of God" and "eternal life" are here used synonymously. But such knowledge cannot be achieved by the intellect of man—it is *life* which is *experienced*, not knowledge *about* life! It can only be received as a gift from God—a gift which has been given to "all the saints" (Ephesians 3:18).

Consider in this regard, the following from Peter:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the *knowledge* of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our *knowledge of him* who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the *divine nature* and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Peter 1:2-4).

Notice that grace and peace—and *all* that pertains to life and godliness—are *given* to us through our *knowledge* of the one who called us. This knowledge is not something to be learned but something to be lived. It is divine love. To experience divine love is to experience God—the life of God. When we experience him, we come to *know* him in a spiritual sense like Adam *knew* his wife Eve in a physical sense. Paul noted that the physical union of a man and his wife reflects the spiritual union of Christ and the church, which he refers to this as "a profound mystery" (Ephesians 5:32).

When we come to experience that which Paul described as *Christ living in me* (Galatians 2:20), we come to experience the life of God himself. It is through that knowledge or experience that we receive grace and peace. It is his *presence* in us that is the source of life and godliness—the law written on our hearts and in our minds! (Hebrews 8:10; 10:16).

This knowledge of God, or of divine love, according to

Peter, is the opposite of—and a corrective for—the "evil desires" which produce the corruption that is in the world (2 Peter 1:2–4). This points to a motive of heart or purpose out of which we think, speak, and act. "Evil desires" point to the self-serving purpose of human nature which makes it corrupt. Such desires are the opposite of the motive of the divine nature, which always seeks the well-being of others, even that of its enemies.

Peter goes on to say that through this knowledge of God—the experience of his divine glory and goodness—God has enabled us to partake of, or participate in, his divine nature! Or, as Paul explains it to the Galatians, "In Christ"—who is the fullness of God—"you have been brought to fullness" (2:8–10). This is consistent with what he wrote to the Colossians: "When Christ, who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory" (3:4).

In his commentary on 2 Peter 1:4, Martin Luther wrote:

But what is the nature of God? It is eternal righteousness, wisdom, eternal life, peace, joy, and happiness, and everything good that can be named. Now whoever becomes a partaker of the nature of God receives all this, namely, he lives forever, possesses endless peace, pleasure and joy, and is sincere, pure, just and almighty against Satan, sin and death. Therefore Peter will say: As impossible as it is to separate eternal life and eternal truth from the nature of God, just so impossible is it to separate them from you. Whatever one does to you, he must do to him, for whoever will crush a Christian must crush God.

In none of the above should it be understood that the process of being filled with the fullness of God reaches completion in this life, since a finite body is not capable of receiving infinite life in its fullness. We know that "we shall be like him" when he shall appear, at which time corruption will put on incorruption and mortality will put on immortality. At that time the "natural body" will be raised as a "spiritual body"

then shall we be prepared to share the likeness and presence of the Lord forever. What *is* possible, however, is that we come to be perfect—τέλειος—in the sense of *mature*.

In the meantime, we are being transformed into his image, having received a down payment, so to speak, which guarantees that we will receive the complete gift. That down payment is of the same currency as that in which we shall receive payment in full. However, it will not consist of an exhaustive explanation of what the Bible means by what it says—as if the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were nothing more than an understanding of scripture.

So, the writer of Hebrews refers to believers as those "who have once been enlightened, who have *tasted* the heavenly gift, who have *shared* in the Holy Spirit, who have *tasted* the goodness of the word of God and the *powers* of the coming age" (6:4–5).

In John 14, we learn that what we have received in our inner being is the presence of the Son of God himself, who is *in* the Father and *in* whom the Father lives. Jesus assured his disciples that his going to the Father—and subsequently sending the Father's Spirit in his place—would enable them to do the *same* good works he had been doing. The same Spirit which empowered him to do works of love would empower and motivate them as well.

Jesus said of the Spirit, "But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." At that moment the Spirit was *in* Jesus and, consequently, was *with* the disciples. But Jesus also said, "I am going to the Father," and "I will not leave you orphans," rather, "I will come to you . . . Before long . . . you will see me" (John 14:18–19).

From these statements we understand that after returning to his Father, Jesus would return to his disciples in the person of the Holy Spirit. Of that event, he said:

Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am *in* my Father, and you are *in* me, and I am *in* you (John 14:19-20).

Consider for the moment, which of these statements—"I am in the Father," "you are in me," and "I am in you"—is to be understood metaphorically? And by what criteria would the selection be made? Is not Jesus's reference to his *living in his disciples* through the Holy Spirit to be understood as literally as the reference to *his living in the Father*?

A Work in Progress

We, who have put our trust in the perfect obedience of Jesus on our behalf, are a work in progress—God's workmanship, as Paul puts it. However, it is to our advantage to understand the process of that work so as to avoid spending our lives trying to become something God has no desire for us to be, while failing to recognize, and perhaps avoiding, his purpose in our lives.

So long as we are in this life, we live in a state of *now, but not yet*, as it has been referred to. While John assures us that we *have* eternal life, Jesus says that eternal life is to be expected "in the world to come." Jude says we are to "wait for . . . eternal life." And Paul speaks of the "hope of eternal life." Whereas we have escaped the corruption that is in the world, we still must put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature, in spite of the fact that our old self has been crucified with Christ. With Paul we might say, *I have been crucified with Christ* and I no longer live. Yet, again with Paul, *I die daily*. Although we "put on Christ" in baptism, yet we are subsequently told to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, although we know that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

All Things Are Made New

By casting ourselves upon Jesus in faith, we are given access to a source of knowledge and understanding that is otherwise unavailable to humankind. In fact such knowledge and understanding are based on a view of reality from the vantage point of divine love. That reality is "spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14), being oriented to the mind of the Spirit, and cannot be understood by one in whom the love of the Spirit is not experienced.

The Spirit of God creates within us a new way of being, a new source of life, a new heart or motivation for all that we do—"behold, all things are become new." This inner illumination, the *light of love* (1 John 2:10), enables us to *see* things in a way we could not otherwise see, regardless of formal training or intellectual ability. Paul refers to this phenomenon in writing to the Philippians when he says:

And this is my prayer: that your *love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God* (1:9-11).

Notice carefully how Paul prays that their *love may abound . . . in knowledge and . . . insight*. That insight enables them to *discern what is best*.

Growth in divine love results in our being *filled with the fruit of righteousness*. Fruit of this nature, resulting from a growth in love, does not come as the result of merely exercising our intellect or expanding our knowledge of scripture.

The growth of divine love in the heart results in our being strengthened with the *power* of that love in our inner being, through his Spirit. This comes as the effect of his "ever-

increasing" presence in our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is what Paul prayed for on behalf of the Ephesians: "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation *in the knowledge of him* (Ephesians 1:17).

When we allow the love of the Spirit to rule over us, he illuminates our hearts and minds. He dispels the darkness of selfishness by reorienting our worldview—from *ego-centric* to *other-centric*.

When Jesus takes up his home (μονήν = *mansion*, John 14:23) in our hearts, his life becomes "the light of the eye." As the effect of his presence increases, he becomes *formed* within us (Galatians 4:19) and his love *is made complete* in us (1 John 4:12b). Consequently, as Paul wrote: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6).

7. If we are not capable of understanding or obeying the scriptures perfectly, what is their purpose and value?

The scriptures tell us that they are valuable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and instructing in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). They tell us in *propositional terms* what God is attempting to do in us in *personal terms*. They tell us what godly conduct *looks like* in *some* circumstances. But they were not intended to provide a law that could impart life (Galatians 3:21) nor the *love* by which conduct is rendered godly in *every* circumstance.

Righteous conduct must always proceed from divine love—else it is not right (1 Corinthians 13). But divine love must be received from God (1 John 4:7)—else it is not divine. God's love is received when he gives us his Spirit (Romans 5:5). His Spirit is the essence of his nature (2 Corinthians 2:10, 11). The nature of God is love (1 John 4:16)—the kind of love upon which true

obedience is predicated (1 Corinthians 13) and by which the "law of Christ" is fulfilled (Galatians 6:2).

Obedience is always predicated upon a right attitude or motive of heart (Matthew 15:18–19). It is to *live . . . according to the Spirit*, to have the mind set on *what the Spirit desires* or to be governed by the Spirit (Romans 8:4). It is to *keep in step with the Spirit* (Galatians 5:25). Simply put, it is to "Do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14)—the love of the Spirit (Romans 15:30).

The scriptures affirm that "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our *knowledge of him* who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3). While they tell us *about* the divine power, it is his power in us that supplies everything we need. That power enables us to know God. It is that knowledge or experience of his divine love—conveyed to us by his Spirit (Romans 5:5; Ephesians 3:16)—that enables us to live holy lives.

There are those who conclude that, in our day, God's power is limited to the effect of scripture upon the human mind. For them, the Holy Spirit is little more than a retired author. According to this view, God no longer works miracles—he no longer intervenes directly in the affairs of humans. Consequently, his ability "to will and to act" (Philippians 2:13) is limited by the intellectual inability of the reader of scripture to understand its meaning and carry out its instructions.

The implications of this world view make it difficult to imagine how God could answer prayer in any meaningful way. If he cannot act above nature, what *could* he do differently, in answer to prayer, than he *would* have done had no request been made? If he intervenes in the natural universe, he is acting *above* nature, and thus, *super-naturally*. If he never intervenes, then prayer is never answered. While it may serve as a form of therapeutic meditation, it cannot result in God's direct

intervention into human affairs.

When Paul says, "But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3), are we to understand him to mean that God will teach you through scripture how you are to protect yourself from the evil one? How would that be possible given the fact that the saints in Thessalonica would be dead long before any of them would have a copy of the entire New Testament scriptures—which were still being written? How would subsequent generations of illiterate believers benefit from Paul's reassurance?

Peter says:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides (1 Peter 4:10).

But how are we to understand Peter? What are the "various forms" of God's grace? In what sense are they "received"? What is the "strength which God provides"? How does he supply that strength?

Does he mean that you should read the scriptures in order to find the strength or encouragement to be diligent in your use of the different talents with which you were born? If so, why would Peter urge his readers to serve with the strength with which they were born? Would it not make every person—including the unbeliever—a faithful steward of God's grace? How would the "strength which God provides" to the believer differ from the strength of the unbeliever?

When Peter uses the phrases "you have received," "God's grace," and "God provides" is he simply referring to innate abilities and the use of the written word? If that were true, it seems he could have avoided using a circumlocution and simply

said: "Read your Bible and do conscientiously what comes naturally!"

When Paul states, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), does it seem reasonable to imagine that he is simply saying, I can do all things as long as I keep on reading the scriptures and attempting to do what they say—to the extent of my imperfect understanding and ability? If so, what source is he to turn to for strength to always read the scriptures or to always do what they say? Furthermore, how are the illiterate to receive strength from God if their opportunity to hear scripture is limited by their inability to read? How do they become fully mature in the Lord?

Finally, if these admonitions are referring only to the written revelation of scripture, what were they to do who did not live long enough for the new covenant scriptures to be written and collected into a single volume (around the fourth century A.D.)?

It seems clear to me that the above statements by both Peter and Paul relative to the strength which God provides have reference to one and the same thing for which Paul prays on behalf of the Ephesians: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may *strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being*" (3:16).

It is alleged by some that such references are to the special gifts of the Spirit referred to in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, with what were those gifts replaced in the centuries that intervened before the canon of New Testament scripture was universally recognized by the Christian community. To what did Christians turn for *strength* during the centuries that intervened before the invention of the printing press in 1440 or before a copy of the printed Bible was affordable, even by the middle economic class? To what were the vast majority of Christians to turn for strength who were illiterate, when the only time scripture was

read, it was read in a language they could not understand?

All special gifts of the Spirit had a single purpose—to prepare God's people for works of service (Ephesians 4:12). They were so designed because the body is only "built up . . . in love, as each part does it work." Thus, the gifts to which Peter refers (1 Peter 4:11) were to be exercised "to serve others."

If all New Testament references to the Holy Spirit have reference to the written word, how are we to understand Paul's statement that "whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17)? Are we to understand that for our "spirit" to be joined with his "Spirit" means we must understand the scriptures to the extent that he does?

Our *knowledge of God* is made possible by the presence of his divine love in our hearts (1 John 4:7, 8; 3:24). It is through that *knowledge* that he has given us "everything we need for life and godliness." All that we need for life and godliness is the divine love of God by which his will is fulfilled. It is his Spirit who provides the love which provides the power which enables us to know him (Ephesians 3:16). Through that knowledge, we have come to share his eternal life—the likeness of his divine nature (2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Peter 1:4).

It is through the presence of God's divine love that he gives us the strength to take up daily the cross of self-denial so as to allow him to will and work through us, body, soul, and spirit, in the service of others.

Jesus said:

"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that *in them* you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet *you refuse to come to me to have life*" (John 5:39, 40).

Although it is a good thing to learn *about* eternal life by

searching the scriptures. It is another thing to *share the eternal life of Jesus*, of whom the scriptures speak. The scriptures do not provide an exhaustive description of life and godliness. Its value is in pointing us to their source. All that matters is that we come to *know* or experience that source. Knowing him who is love, through faith, is the *only thing that counts*.

Jesus' statement, "you refuse to come to me to have life" does not mean his audience was unwilling to give up one law to accept another. Had that been the case, Jesus would surely have attempted to persuade them that God had replaced the holy, righteous and good Law of Moses with one that was far more holy, righteous, and good. But no new law was ever mentioned by Jesus or his apostles! A new covenant was spoken of, but not a new law.

What was to be written upon the hearts of those who put their faith in Jesus was not a new law, but the only law God ever gave. The difference was that it was not to be written in a book. It was to be written upon the heart! It was the righteousness of the law that was fulfilled by Christ on behalf of those who believe in his name Romans 8:1–3).

What the Jews rejected was the idea that *eternal life is a gift*—*not a moral nor legal accomplishment*. Neither were they willing to believe that the life within Christ was the eternal life of God himself—the fulfillment and embodiment of the very scriptures they were attempting to obey as a means of achieving what was *in Jesus*, and which they could only acquire as a gift from him.

The hearts of those who rejected Jesus were closed to *receiving* as a gift what they believed they must *achieve* through their own response to God's commands. They were blind to the imperfect nature of all such attempts. So, *they did not achieve what they sought* because, as Paul explains, they didn't seek it as a gift—through faith—but as something merited (Romans 9:32).

That God is not concerned with our having precise theological knowledge is evident from scripture. For example, Paul acknowledges that there is only "one God," but observes that not all believers possess this knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:6–7). In spite of the fact that he declares the belief in many gods to be contrary to truth, *he makes no effort to correct their mistaken doctrinal views*. Their ignorance in this regard was of no substantial consequence—so long as they refused to allow other "gods" to come before Jehovah God.

What God wants is not minds filled with concepts *about* him, but hearts full of *him* to whom those concepts refer. He wants to be himself in us—to enable us to love as he loves, to joyfully lay down our lives in the service of one another—regardless of political party, national citizenship, ethnic origin, or geographical location. In laying down his life for us, Christ defined and demonstrated for all times and all cultures the nature and meaning of the divine love of God (1 John 3:16)—which is eternal life (John 17:3; 1 John 5:20).

The term "law of Christ" (τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) occurs only once in scripture (Galatians 6:2). That law was stated by Jesus in John 15:12—"Love each other *as* I have loved you"—and repeated in 2 John 1:6—"His command is that you walk in love." This command subsumes all other commands of God.

To love like Jesus always results in giving priority to the needs of others. Consequently, it is said to be *fulfilled* by carrying the burdens of others (Galatians 6:2). Furthermore, it can *only* be fulfilled in this way! If he *lives* in us, he must *love* through us. And if he loves through us, we will carry the burdens of others as if they were our own—since that is how *he* loves.

8. How can God be in fellowship with someone who disagrees with him? Doesn't "walking in the light" mean being in perfect agreement with God on everything?

This is similar to asking whether a child can be his father's son without understanding everything his father tells him. A newborn, of course, has no understanding, but he is still a child. Furthermore, whether a child's intellect develops normally or abnormally has nothing at all to do with whether it shall continue to be a member of the family. The genetic relationship does not rest on the child's ability to understand that relationship. Neither does the spiritual relationship of God to his children rest upon their ability to understand that relationship. Rather it rests upon faith in the father who begot them and in the one through whom he revealed himself.

John says that God's *seed* remains in the one who is born of God (1 John 3:9). That seed, he said, is the "anointing" which "remains in you" and "teaches you about all things" (2:27). This is the same reality to which Paul refers when observing that "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). To the Thessalonians he wrote: "Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been *taught by God to love* each other (1 Thessalonians 4:9).

Our kinship with God is not metaphorical or figurative. It is a reality that pertains to the Spirit of God—whether or not he lives in us (Romans 8:9). To have his Spirit is to have his "spiritual genes," so to speak. So long as a child of God does not refuse to submit to what he understands God's will to be, he remains a part of the family, because of his birth.

Light in John's epistles does not refer to intellectual understanding of doctrine. Rather, he uses the terms *light*, *love*, *Spirit*, *truth*, *life*, *anointing*, and *knowledge* as synonymous terms. The *light* of which John speaks is the divine *love* of God.

Consequently, the statement that "God is light" (1 John 1:5) is synonymous with the affirmation that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). To "walk in the light" is simply to walk in the "love of the Spirit" (Romans 15:30), to be "led by the Spirit of God"

(Romans 8:14). The Spirit is the "spirit of unity" (Romans 15:5). It is he who constitutes "one heart and mouth" with which we are to glorify God (Romans 15:6) or "worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

Our fellowship with God is *of* or *with* the Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1). That fellowship is contingent only on our walking in the *light* because it consists only of our walking in the Spirit who is divine *love* (1 John 1:5b; 2:9-11).

Fellowship is not contingent on an understanding of doctrine identical with that of the Spirit. It is based solely upon whether or not God's Spirit lives in you and me. If the Spirit of God lives in you, you are his child. If he lives in me, you are my brother or sister. This is true whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not. We don't get to choose our spiritual siblings. And we are to receive all whom God has received upon the same basis as that upon which he received us (Romans 15:7).

9. If we can't all agree on the meaning of scripture, how shall we all be one—in keeping with the prayer of Jesus?

Several years ago, while teaching a Sunday morning Bible class, I pointed out that it is not necessary for us to all have the same understanding of scripture in order to be in fellowship with God and with each other. During the intermission before the "worship service," a visitor informed me that he was leaving to go worship with another congregation nearby. However, he wanted first to tell me why he couldn't stay. He said:

I listened carefully to what you had to say earlier about our not having to agree on everything. But if that were true, then the Lord's prayer—"that they may be one"—could never be answered!

He further explained that he could not worship with brethren who believed as I did.

As I listened to our visitor explain why he felt he had to leave in protest, I could see that he was deeply convicted, and I had no desire at the moment to attempt to correct what seemed to be a sincere but mistaken understanding of Jesus's prayer for the visible unity of his disciples. I recalled the time when I too shared his conviction and would have accompanied him as he left. So, I simply reassured him that I understood his point of view and his reason for leaving, and suggested we discuss the matter later through correspondence.

As I later shared with our visitor, the unity of which Jesus spoke in his prayer to the Father is *not a oneness of intellect* but of a oneness of spirit, of divine love. We are siblings because of *whom* we know, not *what* we know. We are not brothers-in-law, but brothers who share the same spiritual DNA—children begotten of the same father.

Jesus prayed specifically that his followers be *one as he and his father are one*. Since it is not possible that we humans have knowledge or understanding commensurate with that of the Father or the Son, we can only share in their oneness in a manner in which we are capable. That manner is revealed in Jesus's prayer:

"... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you. May they also be *in* us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one *as we are one: I in them and you in me*" . . . "that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" (John 17:21-23, 26).

The oneness for which Jesus prayed clearly transcends the incidental limitation of our knowledge and understanding which arise from our human predicament. It comes from his being in

us in the same way in which the Father is in the Son.

Relative to this unity Jesus said: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one" (v. 22). That glory is the presence of God himself. To have within us the same divine "love of the Spirit," who is the life of the Father and the Son, is to share in the glory of God. So Jesus prayed: ". . . that the love you have for me . . . may be in them." For this reason, oneness can only be assured by the "power" of God's "name" or the power of his presence (17:11).

The *power* or presence of God in the heart enables "all the saints" to know the dimensions of the divine love of Christ—the essence of his fullness (Ephesians 3:16-18) which we have been made to share. His presence makes us one with him and with all others in whom he lives.

His inner presence is also the power by which we are transformed into the likeness of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is the "high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14)! This is the "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10). This renewal, Paul tells us, is ongoing—"day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

As Paul further explains, we are in the process of being transformed:

"We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed *into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

The more we are made to look like him, the more of his glory we made to share—from *glory to glory*. When God shines the *light of his divine love* in our hearts, we come to experience his *glory*. And we have this treasure in *pots of clay*, so that it may be clear to all that the power behind this remarkable

transformation is not that of our own intellect, but of the all-surpassing power of God! (2 Corinthians 4:6-7). Consequently, the glory we come to share is not ours, but that of him whose likeness we bear.

Paul further explains:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, *so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body*. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, *so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body* (2 Corinthians 4:10–11).

It is also the presence of God in the hearts of all believers that makes them essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one, to borrow a phrase from Thomas Campbell. They are united by virtue of sharing the same Spirit—which is what it means to have spiritual *koinonia* or fellowship.

It is the one who does *not* have the Spirit of Christ—whether baptized or not—who clearly is *not* united to him (Romans 8:9). But that is something *only* God can know and judge! That's why we can neither give nor withdraw spiritual fellowship, nor be the final judge of who is in fellowship with God and who is not.

There are three reasons for which the early believers were told to avoid the company of another believer, and *only* three: (1) when a brother persisted in moral turpitude, (2) when a disciple was divisive, or (3) when a believer would not work so as to be able to supply the needs of those for whom he was responsible—who failed to walk in love toward his own family. No doubt the last condition could apply to any conduct that should contradict the implications of our profession of faith.

In no case, however, are we ever told to withdraw spiritual fellowship from a disciple who is guilty of the above extravagances. We are told to avoid having social contact with

him—but always to regard him as a *brother*—one in whom the Spirit of God continues to live. The intention of social isolation is to shock the brother into recognizing his behavior to be absolutely contrary to the godliness implicit in the gospel—in the hope that he might be prompted to repent.

It is noteworthy that when the discipline of a brother has had its desired effect, the apostolic instruction is:

Therefore I urge you to *reaffirm your love to him* (2 Corinthians 2:8, HCSB).

Never in the pages of New Testament scripture is anyone ever censured for making an honest mistake in understanding scripture! But scripture does censure those who divide God's children over the meaning of the Father's instructions.

Divisiveness, or the creation of factions among brothers in Christ, is said to be a work of the flesh (Galatians 5:20), and, thereby, contrary to the love of the Spirit. It is to elevate one's own interests or intellect over that of others. It is to arrogantly assert one's own correctness over that of his brothers rather than, in humility, to preserve or maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is to elevate interpretations over individuals and prefer propositions over people for whom Christ died.

It is ironic that the history of Churches of Christ seems best organized by the divisions which have determined its course. Yet this may be accounted for in part by the fact that its people have been trained to understand scripture in such a way as to find themselves constrained by conscience to divide. I have sometimes referred to this phenomenon as *conscientious factionalism*—an understanding of scripture in which God is thought to *forbid* division yet *command* that we separate from those who disagree with our interpretations of certain scriptures. Regrettably, it completely misunderstands God's purpose in the new covenant and the new creation.

10. If it is impossible for us to be perfect in our understanding or obedience, what is the point of trying to be?

While it is impossible for us to have a perfect understanding of scripture, we may not willfully or intentionally disobey with impunity what we understand to be any expression of God's will. We cannot do so for two reasons. First, faith will not allow it. Any desire to be imperfect in understanding or obedience contradicts the very thing we affirm—the faith by which we are "counted" perfect in Christ. Faith in Jesus includes a commitment to be obedient in all we understand him to mean by what he says in scripture, and a desire to grow in our understanding.

Secondly, the Spirit is at work in us, leading us to maturity. Or as Paul once said, "the love of Christ *compels* us." This is the process called "sanctification," and we are warned not to resist or quench the Spirit by whom we are sanctified (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). To resist the Spirit is to return to the base, self-serving purpose which motivated us when we were slaves to unrighteousness. It is tantamount to the return of a dog to its vomit.

John puts it this way:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. *All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure* (1 John 3:2, 3).

Since it is our goal, and that of the Spirit, to be like God and reflect his glory in an "ever-increasing" way, we look forward in hopeful expectation to the day when we shall be exactly as he is (1 John 3:2)—perfect in every way. Then, all the mystery of the gospel will have been realized: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

While God overlooks our inability to be right about *everything*, he will *not* overlook a desire to be wrong about *anything*. To be unintentionally wrong is unavoidable due to the limitations of our human condition. To *intend* to be wrong, on the other hand, is to rebel against God and deny the faith which enables God to overlook imperfection.

To attempt to obey God's law perfectly as a condition for being accepted by him is burdensome and, if we are honest with ourselves, the results are discouraging because they are never what we expect nor what we believe God expects. On the other hand, when acquittal and immunity for inadvertent and unrecognized sin is received as a gift, our unintentional failure to understand or obey perfectly is of no eternal consequence, although it is unavoidably disappointing.

Furthermore, when the Spirit of God's law has been planted, sent, put, or poured out into our hearts, our innermost desire is changed. Doing his will becomes not only our greatest joy, but we are inwardly compelled to seek the things of God above all else—to the extent that our true desire is that he have his way with out hearts.

While we continue to walk in the flesh, we are engaged in warfare with the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2). Consequently, it is important that we take note of the insight that Paul shared with the disciples at Corinth:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) casting down *imagination*s, and every high thing that *exalteth itself against the knowledge of God*, and bringing into captivity *every thought* to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5, KJV).

In this continual, internal conflict to which Paul refers, we

are bombarded with thoughts and imaginations that are based on a false concept of reality and the lie that we will not surely die. We are deceived by our senses into believing that such fantasies are true and that they will surely bring real and lasting satisfaction. We are led to believe at some level that acting out of self-interest, doing what promises to feel good and what appeals to our ego as individuals, will be self-fulfilling. But we are simply being deceived and drawn away by selfish desires, which are always deceitful. What holds the prospect of self-fulfillment is, in reality, self-destruction.

To avoid having one of our fellow-soldiers "turn away from the living God," the writer of Hebrews urges that we encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of us may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness (Hebrews 3:12, 13). He further admonishes that we "think about how to stir one another up to love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24), since it is divine love within us that counters those deceitful, self-serving motives which enable the devil to lead us captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26). We are God's creation! His workmanship! We were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

Consequently, the purpose for which Christians assemble should always be that of edifying one another. The special gift of prophecy was to be desired precisely because it was designed for the building up of others.

God has not only *prepared good works* for us to do, he has *prepared us to do good works*. He has done this by empowering us with the love of the divine presence. This disposes us to be our brother's keeper, and to

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:3-5).

Consistent with what he wrote to the disciples in Philippi, Paul directs the following admonition to the saints at Rome:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and *not to please ourselves*. Each of us should *please his neighbor for his good, to build him up*. For even *Christ did not please himself* . . . May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of *unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus* (Romans 15:1-3a, 5).

The spirit of unity *is* the spirit of preference for others above self.

Finally, Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

No one should seek his own good, but the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:24).

We might ask, How is it possible to "follow Christ Jesus" when it is stated that "Christ did not please himself"? Can a servant be greater than his master? Or have we failed to count the cost of *true* discipleship? However, when we are compelled by the Spirit to serve others, we are also filled with "peace and joy" (Romans 14:17). So our service is that of a willing heart. The commitment to serve the needs of others becomes second nature—since it comes from our spiritual nature. Yet these matters are seldom considered to be among the "weightier matters" of God's will. Rather they rank far below the presumed commandment to "give of our means."

Divine love, doesn't need to be *commanded* to take care of the poor or to accept the responsibility of serving the needs of others, any more than we need to be commanded to take care of our own children. When God strengthens us with power through his Spirit in our inner being, we are enabled to grasp the dimensions of the love that has been poured out into our hearts—the extent to which that love will go in meeting the needs of

others. As we mature, we *super-naturally* come to love all whom God loves in the way and to the extent to which he loves them (Ephesians 3:16-18).

It is an incontrovertible fact that we can't be led by the Spirit and ignore the needs of those whom God loves—any more than we can naturally ignore the needs of our own children. When we put our own interests ahead of taking care of those who are in need—especially those who are our spiritual siblings—we fail to act on behalf of Jesus himself. To claim to have the love of God in our hearts while remaining indifferent to human need is a contradiction of God's reality.

The Roman Catholic nun, Mother Teresa, spent a large part of her life rescuing the sick and dying "untouchables" from the streets of Calcutta. These were people who may never have felt the touch of another human hand. As the story is told, she would take these wretched souls into her compound and simply hold their hand or wipe their brow, giving them food and drink, praying for them, consoling them as she watched them slip away into eternity, their condition being such that nothing more could be done to keep them alive.

In one of her many books which reflect that experience, Mother Teresa concludes that when we look at the faces of those who are suffering in desperate agony, we are, in reality, looking at the very face of Jesus—in *all of his distressing disguises*.

Jesus said that final judgment will be determined by a single consideration: Where is your brother? Were you willing to be his keeper?

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, *you did not do for me*." Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:45–46).

Serving others out of God's divine love is not manifested

only in helping the poor. Divine love encompasses all the other virtues that are mentioned in scripture as reflecting the character of God. They are all behaviors that divine love produces. When we love with the "affection of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:8) we are patient, kind, gentle, long-suffering. We don't envy, we don't boast, we aren't proud, we don't dishonor others, we are not easily angered, we keep no record of wrongs, we are not self-seeking. We are pure in heart, meek, humble, peace-makers who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We value others above ourselves. We are not divisive, we do not make provisions for the flesh to serve its lusts. We are faithful in our commitments, we are sober in our thoughts and demeanor, not allowing any filthy talk to come from our lips. We take no delight in the self-service or the self-promotion of those who do not know God. We couldn't care less about another receiving credit for any good we may have done. And we make it our aim to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

It's not because of what we *know about* Jesus but because we *love* like him that others recognize our resemblance to him. This is our calling. This is the purpose for which we were created. As priests of the king of heaven, it is our life's work to demonstrate by his power the virtues of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous love (1 Peter 2:9).

Conclusion

Can we be unintentionally wrong about anything and go to heaven?

Yes! We may be wrong about *anything but Jesus!*

We must be right about Jesus in order to receive the eternal life which transcends physical death. We must be right about Jesus in order for our unintentional sinfulness to remain

hidden from God until the day we see Jesus face to face and share fully in all the perfection of his holiness.

So, as long as we are right about Jesus, we may be wrong about everything else and still go to heaven.

Is Perfection Required to Go to Heaven?

Absolutely! Those who are to be presented to Christ as his bride will be immaculate! There will be no moral imperfection in heaven. But those who maintain that we must be right about everything in order to go to heaven don't really mean *everything*.

What they mean is simply this: *There are specific doctrines which they believe to be more important than others. It is these doctrines—about interpretations of scripture, primarily regarding church policy and procedure, about which they say we must be right in order to go to heaven. But they never include in their lists the service of others as a non-negotiable practice. In fact, they practice a religion of tenets. They are persuaded that God is more concerned about right thinking than he is about right living. But there is a problem with this type of thinking.*

Those who choose propositions over people and reason over righteousness have a variety of lists of non-negotiable doctrines required for fellowship. The contents of those lists depends on the group you are talking to. Furthermore, none of those who agree about the contents of their list are agreed entirely about the precise meaning of any of the doctrines they require of others as conditions for going to heaven.

Soon after Jesus's public ministry began, he said, "I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets" (Matthew 5:17). In that same context he revealed that the "law and the prophets"—a reference to all the old covenant scripture—are summed up by what is called the *golden rule*—treating others as we want to be

treated (Matthew 7:12).

Later in his public ministry, Jesus said that "the law and the prophets" hang on two commands: love of God and love of neighbor. These two statements of Jesus are later reduced to a single command by Paul who asserts: "Whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. . . . Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

The Pharisees prided themselves on being the guardians of truth, keepers of orthodoxy, intimately familiar with all God had said in scripture. Unfortunately, *they had failed to understand what God meant by what he said*. Consequently, before Jesus fulfilled the law, revealing "the full extent of his love," he first explained what God *meant* by what he said—the true meaning of the law he was to fulfill.

It was not God's law as the Pharisees understood it—*Love your neighbor and hate your enemy*—but God's law as he meant it—*Love your enemies*—that Jesus was to fulfill or embody. The righteousness that God requires is that of the divine nature:

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20)

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

It was the righteousness reflected in the law *as God meant it* that was to be fulfilled in those of us who believe:

For what the law was powerless to do . . . God did . . . in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3-4).

Jesus wanted the Pharisees in particular to know just how

impossible it would be for any man to fulfill (or keep perfectly) the law as God understood it, other than one who was completely full of the Spirit of God, full of his love, the love of the Spirit, upon which the law was based (and thereby fulfilled).

Jesus made it clear that perfect obedience to God's law requires a perfect heart which puts others first in every human relationship and endeavor. It requires a heart that is always eager to bear the burdens of others as if they were its own, thereby fulfilling the "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). This kind of love can only come from God as a gift to those who have been *counted* as perfect in his son.

In summarizing the full meaning of God's law, Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). In other words, we must be as perfect as God in order to go to heaven. But there is only one Way to be perfect. It is by *being found perfect in him who is*. It is to be "dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne."

Jesus is the *only* way to the Father. He is the *author* and *perfecter* of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He has shown us the way and traveled the distance so we might follow in his steps. We are *hidden in Christ* before the eyes of him to whom we must give account, and it is Christ whom the Father sees when he looks at us—never taking into account our state of imperfection in knowledge or conduct due to the weakness of our human nature. It is he who has become *our* righteousness, *our* sanctification and *our* redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). He is, as a dear friend once described him, *our man in heaven!* We *in* him, and he *in* us, and the Father *in* him who is in us—perfect unity, without perfect understanding.

⇐ **ENDNOTES** ⇒

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1 Incidentally, Leroy Garrett, a Church of Christ historian, once shared with me a story from his days as a graduate student at Princeton. He said one day he and his wife, Ouida, were riding in the car with Professor Bruce Metzger (1914–2007), when Ouida asked him about statements in Hebrews that seemed to imply the possibility of apostasy. Metzger simply replied, "The writer of Hebrews was clearly not a Calvinist!"

2 See Chapter 4, "The One-Man Pastor System," in my book, *The Essential W. Carl Ketcherside*. It may be downloaded in a variety of formats from the Archive.org website. It is also available from Amazon Kindle Store and from Google Books.

3 I republished Banowsky's book in 2015 with a new preface by the author. It may be freely downloaded from the website of Archive.org in multiple formats. It is also available from the Amazon Kindle Store.

4 In 1878, Lipscomb made multiple statements in which the weight of Alexander Campbell's thinking was called into question. It appears, at least at first glance, that Lipscomb had a higher opinion of his own concept of the Restoration principles than he did of that of Campbell:

"Even take the present effort to restore the original faith. While I greatly honor the work of Mr. Campbell and his co-adjutors, I am constrained to say they failed to see the full truth of the

Christian religion, the full reach of the principles they adopted. Mr. Campbell gained the standpoint from which others could step forward to an advanced post. But the truth is presented to-day with a clearness that he never perceived." —David Lipscomb, "Does the World Grow Better or Worse?" *Gospel Advocate*, February 7, 1878, Vol. 20, no. 6, p. 87; italics added.

"We do not think the gospel in all its parts, was taught in its full purity by Alexander Campbell or that it is yet so taught among us. . . . We do not know that any people have fully lived up to the whole gospel truth. We are inclined to think that when God's people or any considerable number of them exemplify the full Bible teaching in their lives the millennium, as it is usually called, will make its advent." —David Lipscomb, "Queries," *Gospel Advocate*, October 3, 1878, Vol. 20, no. 39, p. 616.]

"We do not know much about lines, direct or indirect, of descent for truth from apostolic times. . . . But we can find all through the early and dark ages of the church, clear evidence of the existence of people maintaining the sufficiency of Scripture as a rule of faith and practice; and under that principle contending for all the distinctive teachings of Alexander Campbell and many Scripture teachings in their life, that he strangely overlooked or failed to impress. . . . In all the distinctive teachings of A. Campbell, people can be found in all ages of the past, since the apostolic days, maintaining them. I have been habituated to say that a man might choose any year he saw fit, from the days of the apostles to the present, and I would find a people within fifty years of that date maintaining every truth that distinguishes the teachings of Alexander Campbell from the orthodox sects of his day." —Ibid.

5 See Chapter 7, "Principles of Restoration," of my book, *The Essential W. Carl Ketcherside*.

6 One of the obstacles preventing members of Churches of Christ from understanding spiritual fellowship has been their rejection of the idea that the Holy Spirit actually lives in the heart. This view may have originated in Alexander Campbell's position regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in *conversion*.

Campbell denied the Calvinist teaching that before an unbeliever could come to faith, the Holy Spirit must operate directly upon his heart— independent of the testimony of scripture. While Campbell denied that position, he did believe that the Spirit lives and works in the heart of the *believer* by which the work of sanctification is advanced.

Continued opposition to the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer may also be seen to support a rejection of claims that the Holy Spirit is still manifesting himself in miraculous gifts such as those mentioned 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. This is addressed later in this book.

Like Campbell, Barton Stone also believed that faith must come as the result of belief in the testimony of scripture. He also affirmed the indwelling presence of God through his Spirit, thoughts which he expresses clearly in his essay, "Of the Family of God on Earth," from the first issue of his multi-volume *Christian Messenger*.

7 (עִמָּנוּאֵל)

‘Immanu’el = “God with us”

‘im (*with*) + nu (*us*) + El (*God*)

In Hebrew, when combining ‘im (*with*) and nu (*us*), the form becomes ‘immānu.

8 Such love perceives value in its object because of inherent qualities that are attractive or desirable— Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953). The book may be freely downloaded in PDF format at the following

Web address:

<https://archive.org/details/agapeanderosbyandersnygren/>

9 Below are versions which include different words or phrases in the place of "speaking" in Ephesians 4:15.

- "holding the truth in love" (Darby)
- "But do we truth in charity" (Wycliffe)
- "But let us follow the truth in love" (Tyndale)
- "But let us follow the truth in love" (Geneva)
- "But practicing the truth in love" (New English Translation)
- "and, being true in love" (Young's Literal Translation)
- "But doing the truth in charity" (Douay-Rheims Bible)
- "Now, being true, in love" (Concordant Literal Version)
- "but holding the truth in love" (Montgomery New Testament)
- "But following truth in love" (Bishops' Bible)

The idea of following or practicing the truth in love is also reflected in the following translation:

- Italian (Giovanni Diodati)
- Italian (Riveduta Luzzi)
- Spanish (Reina-Valera)
- Portuguese (João Ferreira de Almeida Corrigida)
- Portuguese (João Ferreira de Almeida Atualizada)
- Portuguese (Nova Almeida Atualizada)
- Portuguese (Nova Versão Internacional)
- Portuguese (Bíblia Sagrada Almeida Século 21)

10 Although commentaries on the biblical text are simply better-informed human opinions as to what God meant by what he said in scripture, I share below the opinions of reputable commentators in evidence that my understanding that sin is fundamentally selfishness is not unique with me.

"All sin is selfish, and all selfishness ignores the right of others,"
(W. Robertson Nicoll, Editor, *The Expositor's Bible*).

". . . the root of all sin is selfishness." (Warren W. Wiersbe, in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*).

"All sin is selfishness, or the choice of our own happiness in preference to the good of universal being." (Charles Hodge in *Systematic Theology*).

"We hold the essential principle of sin to be selfishness."
(Augustus Hopkins Strong in *Systematic Theology*).

"We have also seen that all sin is selfishness, or that all sin consists in the will's seeking the indulgence or gratification of self; that it consists in the will's yielding obedience to the propensities instead of obeying God, as his law is revealed in the reason." (Charles G. Finney, in *Lectures on Theology*).

"All sin after the first sin is explicable by selfish inclination and strong evil propensities concurring with outward temptation"
(William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*).

"For the more a sin is contrary to charity the graver it is"
(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*).

"All sin is selfish, and all selfishness ignores the right of others,"
(*The Expositor's Bible*, W. Robertson Nicoll, Editor).

"For to live in love means concretely to allow one's life to be determined by the existence of others, by being "subject" to their needs and demands." (Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*).

"The root of sin is selfishness." (*The Spirit World*, by Clarence Larkin).

**"We hold the essential principle of sin to be selfishness."
(Augustus Hopkins Strong in *Systematic Theology*).**

11 See the seminal essay by Robert Richardson, "The Inconvenience of Always Being Right," *Millennial Harbinger* (October 1836): 465–471.

12 For an examination of the controversy surrounding the letter, see my book *The Lunenburg Letter* (2025). The book may be downloaded in a variety of formats from the Archive.org website.

13 Lipscomb and Sewell, *Queries and Answers*, ed. M. C. Kurfees (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Company, 1921), 42; *italics added*.
